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**Rethinking World Literature from *Moby Dick* to *Missing Soluch***

By

**Amirhossein Vafa**

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics**

**University of Sheffield**

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On a personal note, I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents Mohammadnabi Vafa and Mahindokht Kashfi, who have morally and financially supported my decisions. Last but not least, I stand by my better half Sepideh Gandomi, the power of my heart and the love of my life.

### Abstract of Thesis

This thesis stems from interlocking sites of local and global inequalities that span from the public to cultural realms. Considering the US-Iranian relations, and America's geopolitical presence in the Persian Gulf since the Cold War, my literary study concerns a world order of core-periphery divides that chart the global circulation of travelling texts.

Within this process of establishing "national" and "world texts," silenced are subordinate characters whose untold stories read against the grain of institutional World Literature. Towards an egalitarian cross-cultural exchange, therefore, I examine works of fiction and cinema across a century and two oceans: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Esmail Fassih's *The Story of Javid*, Mahmoud Dowlatbadi's *Missing Soluch*, and Amir Naderi's film *The Runner*. In contention with the widespread Eurocentric treatments of world literatures, and in recognition of radical efforts to reimagine the worldliness of American and Persian literatures respectively, I maintain that aesthetic properties are embedded in their local histories and formative geographies.

Bridging two literary worlds, then, I introduce the Parsee Fedallah as a figure whose significant role has been subdued in Melville scholarship. To retrieve his unheard voice, or "proleptic narrative," is to de-territorialize an American master-text, and to bring the character to his Persian literary and cinematic counterparts in a subversive practice of Comparative Literature. In effect, lived experiences of Fassih's Javid (a *Zoroastrian* national trope) and Dowlatbadi's Mergan (a *marginalized* rural woman) are "proleptic" articulations of Fedallah's voice in Iranian fiction. In-between Melville's outward "sea" and Fassih and Dowlatbadi's inward "land" is an alternative space in which the border-crossing of fictional characters enable counter-hegemonic cartographies. In conclusion, by virtue of his creative conflict with Melville, Naderi's Amiru points at the silver screen as a visual realm of new possibilities beyond the monopoly of an expansive World Literature.



### **Note on Transliterations**

For transliterations of Persian into English, I have adhered to the Library of Congress scheme for romanization without diacritical marks. Names of authors (Esmail Fassih, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi) and characters (Soluch, Mergan, etc.) appear following the works' English translations. Unless noted otherwise, translations of Persian-language sources into English are mine, including extracts from original copies of *Missing Soluch* and *The Story of Javid*.

## List of Figures

1.1	Munis in Shirin Neshat's <i>Women without Men</i>	4
2.1	"America – the Real Center of the World" as imagined by Ishmael; Library of Congress	46
2.2	"Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail," illustrated by Patrick Benson; courtesy of Walker Books	67
2.3	"Take another pledge, old man," illustrated by Benson	86
2.4	Mahmoud Dowlatabadi paying homage to <i>Moby-Dick</i> ; courtesy of Melville House	97
3.1	"Map of Persia" (1886); British Library	105
3.2	United States' military bases encircling Iran; Aljazeera (Piven)	106
3.3	Achaemenid griffin on the jacket of <i>The Story of Javid</i>	137
4.1	"The Voyage of the Pequod," illustrated by Everett Henry; Library of Congress	157
4.2	"Fedallah and Mergan," illustrated by Sepideh Gandomi	159
4.3	Translations of <i>Moby-Dick</i> and <i>Missing Soluch</i> , illustrated by Gandomi	161
4.4	Southern Khurasan landscape; ISNA (Khamooshi)	192
4.5	Lut desert in Eastern Iran; ISS the International Space Station	198
4.6	Ahab on his boat without Fedallah	208
5.1	Amiru, calling out "Hey!" to an oil tanker	209
5.2	Amiru, frequenting the airport	217
5.3	Amiru's solitary quarters	218
5.4	Amiru takes "another pledge," and the crew survives	223
5.5	Closing shot of <i>The Runner</i>	224

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	ii
<b>Abstract of Thesis</b>	iii
<b>Note on Transliterations</b>	iv
<b>List of Figures</b>	v
<b>Table of Content</b>	vi
<b>1) Towards a Reading of <i>Moby-Dick</i> beyond Tehran</b>	1
Back to the Future	1
Departing a World Republic of Letters	5
Transcending the West	11
Rethinking World Literature from American Literature to Persian <i>Adab</i>	15
Rehearsal of Arguments	27
<b>2) Call Me Fedallah: Reading a Proleptic Narrative in <i>Moby-Dick</i></b>	41
Whaling Voyage by One Parsee	41
The Subordinate Phantom	51
Bound Round the World!	57
Meeting the Devil in Disguise	64
Call Me Fedallah	80
Chapter Summary	95
<b>3) Call Him Javid: Limning Iranian Manhood in <i>The Story of Javid</i></b>	99
Relocating a Proleptic Narrative	99
Outward Sea, Inward Land	104
From Fedallah to Javid: An Original Iranian Manhood	110
Call Me Esmail	123
On the Road	128
Qajar Tehran	134
Chapter Summary	148



<b>4) Call Her Mergan: Breaking the Silence of <i>Missing Soluch</i></b>	152
Binding a Proleptic Narrative	152
Retrieving a Defiant Subject	162
A Tale of Three Women	174
God's Land: Mergan's Poetics of Defiance	185
Chapter Summary	205
 <b>5) Amiru's Pledge: A Melvillean Vision from Iran to America</b>	209
On the Waterfront	209
A Melvillean Vision	211
Run, Amiru, Run!	215
 <b>Bibliography</b>	225



## Chapter 1

### Towards a Reading of *Moby-Dick* beyond Tehran

#### Back to the Future

In chapter 89 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," the narrator Ishmael speaks of a circumstance amongst whalers when "a whale may be struck by one vessel; then escape, and be finally killed and captured by another vessel" (446). To avoid conflict in such matters, American fishermen, who "have been their own legislators and lawyers in this matter," decree that a "Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it" while a "Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it" (ibid). Never content with the literal significance of his observations, of course, the loquacious Ishmael proceeds to allegorize this simple doctrine of whaling capitalism by thinking in terms of the world that Ahab's vessel is bound to explore and exploit:

What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to Czar? What Greece to the Turks? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish. (*MD* 449)

Sitting as sole survivor of the *Pequod's* wreck at the heart of a Great American Novel, Ishmael incorporates the antebellum ideology of Manifest Destiny (to embrace "Mexico" as the "United States") into "the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World" (*MD* 449). To his mind, which has already been granted the epistemic power of the pen to speak what his heart desires, the human condition itself is a "Loose-Fish" that will sooner or later be harpooned by an overpowering party. At last, looking us readers in the eye, the flamboyant Ishmael flags "the great globe itself" as a fair game and asks: "what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (ibid).

Because the following pages on American and Persian fiction are immersed in what the novelist Chad Harbach calls "a thriving cult of



Melvilleania" (62), I could not as a reader with Iranian background ignore Ishmael's words when I first opened Kermit Roosevelt's *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran*. An account of the adventures of a CIA agent and Cold Warrior during the summer of 1953 in Iran, where Theodor Roosevelt's grandson was conspiring alongside Muhammad Riza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979) to depose the democratically elected Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq in the Operation AJAX, *Countercoup* is chillingly dedicated to "the long-standing friendship between the Iranian and American people and to its continuation, albeit under different circumstances" (iv). Treating his Iranian reader as a Fast-Fish, Roosevelt is by "different circumstances" referring to Stalinist communism, which then seemed to threaten Iran from its northern neighbor the Soviet Union. More interesting parallels surface as we tap into Roosevelt's diaries against the canonical backdrop of *Moby-Dick* during the Cold War—the time when Melville's *magnum opus* was thought, quite surprisingly, to celebrate Ishmael's liberal values against Ahab's totalitarianism (Spanos 33). As Roosevelt emerges to share Ishmael's haughty idealism, post-1953 Iranians symbolize the *Pequod's* crew as they stood in horror, witnessing the Shah reinstating his claim to power. Mission accomplished, Roosevelt even chose to return home via Nantucket, the whaling capital of the world according to Herman Melville, albeit after a short stop in London to convey the good news to Winston Churchill (207–8).

The Anglo-American Operation AJAX marked the beginning of a special relationship between Iran and the United States, one that lasted on friendly terms until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and turned fatefully sour in the decades ahead. For the past thirty-four years, and particularly since the 444 days of Hostage Crisis at the US embassy in Tehran (1979– 1981), during which fifty-two American diplomats were held hostage partly as a result of the events in 1953, the two nations "have been locked in a deadly embrace" (Abrahamian 1). While successive Islamic Republic officials have been viewing America as a neocolonial power always toying with regime change in their country, US administrations accuse Iran of disrupting world peace and, more recently, harboring a secretive nuclear program (ibid). More

significantly, the rift has also borne a civilizational aspect particularly since, as Edward Said notes, the US media coverage of the Hostage Crisis began to intensify the Orientalist divide between “Islam” and the “West,” a dichotomy that simplifies the former as a dehistoricized “scapegoat” to justify latter’s “detailed problems” around the world (*CI* xii-xv). The ideological obsession of many Iranians and Americans with their shared past also occupies the cultural realm in, for instance, annual demonstrations at the former US embassy in Tehran (Kamali Dehghan), and the more bizarre occasion of First Lady Michel Obama, broadcast live from the White House, presenting the Best Picture of 2013 Academy Awards to Ben Affleck’s *Argo*, a thriller based on the escape of six American diplomats from Iran during the Hostage Crisis (Makarechi).

In this thesis, I will be looking at the American-Iranian rift from a different angle. The Parsee Fedallah, a Persian harpooner on board the *Pequod*, and the most dehumanized figment of Ishmael’s imagination, is a minor character who bears an unacknowledged capacity to swim against the tides and speak despite all odds, offering a bracing reading of *Moby-Dick*. Fedallah, according to the “proleptic narrative” I wish to retrieve from the text, is a literary messenger running across dichotomized minds and traumatized imaginations, who jostles his way past Ishmael (and Agent Roosevelt), beyond the crew (and the hostage takers), so as to join Melville’s fellow Iranian artists who have since been observing history unfold. As a foreshadowing gesture, I note that an initial portrait of Fedallah as the elusive yet suggestive agent of my scholarship is *not* a native character from *Argo*, appropriated in Orientalist fashion to serve American interests through Affleck’s retrospective turn to a geopolitically traumatic past. Rather, Fedallah reflects one of the characters in Shirin Neshat’s *Women without Men*, a film adaptation of a Shahrnush Parsipur novel by the Iranian-American photographer, which foregrounds the lives of four women at the height of the events in 1953. These women do not corroborate a gap between civilizations, as do Affleck’s characters, but participate in a journey of self-discovery, conscious and critical of the very events that are shaping their

destinies. Focalized in the following still from the film is the character Munis (Shabnam Toloui) negotiating her femininity and autonomy, à la Fedallah, in a pro-democracy rally in August 1953 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Munis in Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men*

Indeed, the attempt to cross and transcend the breach over an unsettling shared past through the realms of literature and cinema is an ambitious project befitting of the utopian goals of comparative literary studies. Yet one question remains, and will continue to preoccupy my theoretical concerns in this thesis: Can the practice of Comparative Literature and, more broadly, the idea of *World Literature* provide the most productive means to an egalitarian dialogue between histories and cultures? At its most articulate, the Goethean constitution of World Literature (as opposed to the descriptive term world literatures) is institutionally uppercased and resolved to wed varied and variegated literary traditions from all corners of our fragile planet under one unifying rubric. Within this process of cultural diversification, of dislocating the “local” and pulverizing them into “glocal” (Damrosch *Read WL* 109), silenced are potent individual voices—such as Melville’s Fedallah and Neshat’s Munis—whose disrupted narratives run against the grain of both national and world literary endeavors that comply to serve the unbalanced globality of literary exchange.



### Departing a World Republic of Letters

At the University of Sheffield library, where I am conducting this research, a Persian novel and an Iranian-American memoir showcase my concerns with the production, circulation, and reception of what is generally regarded as World Literature. Firstly, Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, one of the formative texts of early-twentieth-century Iranian fiction (Katouzian 7), is located in the grim vaults of the PEARCE collection, adjacent to the fire exit, on—but inaccessible from—the ground floor. Secondly, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, an Iranian-American bestseller that has reified the Orientalist understanding of gender relations in the Muslim world for a post-9/11 Euro-American readership (Bahramitash 222, Dabashi BW 12), is placed in the main sequence on the top floor of the state of the art Information Commons, one of the busiest hubs on campus. Here the cases of Hedayat and Nafisi, following Franco Moretti's characterization of the "world literary system" as "one" but "profoundly unequal" ("Conjectures" 161), expose structural inequalities *architecturally* writ large at Sheffield University.

Such curricular positionings are, according to Aamir R. Mufti, rooted in "global relations of force" that the idea of World Literature "simultaneously puts in play and hides from view," promoting itself as "hugely encompassing" (reaching a university without a Comparative Literature program) yet remaining "strangely timid" (proving incapable of appreciating a culture without stripping it of its external reality, 319). What is more, even throughout Western Asia, once part of the imperial expanse of a Persian-speaking world now reshaped through the hegemony of global English, the average local reader is unaware of contemporary Iranian literature while s/he has relatively easy access to texts like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the original English or Urdu translation (336). This, as Mufti reiterates, is in part "the long legacy of colonial empires and their logics of Orientalization" that have formed an always-already "suppressed element" in formations of World Literature (318, 336).

From Goethe and Marx in the nineteenth, to Moretti and Casanova in the twentieth-century, proponents of World Literature have harbored a curatorial approach towards literatures outside the purview of Euro-American aesthetic standards, causing an ever-increasing rift between the local and the global, the national and the cosmopolitan. It was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in conversation with Peter Eckermann in 1827, who reminded the term *Weltliteratur* to broaden his vision beyond the confines of national literatures: “the epoch of World-Literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (20). While Goethe’s aspirations were rooted in a lack of “political unity” in early nineteenth-century Germany, as well as “a renewed spirit of cosmopolitanism in Europe” (Pizer 23), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels returned to the notion in 1848, declaring in the *Communist Manifesto* that “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures arises a world literature (136–7). Writing then in terms of the rapid growth of world capitalism halfway through the nineteenth-century, Marx revisited Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* “as part of a global tendency closely related to economic and political developments” (Longxi 515).

In its contemporary developments, set against the backdrop of a globalized network of aggressive market capitalism, the institution of World Literature is, in David Damrosch’s words, “an elliptical refraction of national literatures” that geographically expands through translation or philological exchange, providing the world reader with an imaginary window into different temporal and spatial localities (*WL* 281). Upon the emerging sight of such increasingly expanding body of texts, having at least quantitatively crossed the borders of Western Europe and North America since René Etiemble proposed to rethink *Weltliteratur* in the 1970s, scholars have examined the legacy of Goethe’s vision in the more globalized world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Franco Moretti, whose conception of “the world literary system” is, as noted above, a model for understanding the current state of the discipline as

“simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*” (“Conjectures” 161), aptly concedes that the hierarchical order of World Literature today is far from what Goethe and Marx had aspired for (ibid). In fact, by way of the rather unorthodox method of “distant reading,” a bird’s eye perspective on all the world’s literatures “*without a single textual reading*” in his emphatic words, Moretti suggests that the socio-economic construction of “a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery)” accounts for the systemic violence at the heart of the “world literary system” (ibid), affecting the evolutionary flow of aesthetic products from, say, the metropolitan New York of Herman Melville to the outlying Tehran of Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, authors under my scrutiny in the following chapters. By the same token, Pascale Casanova, who views institutional World Literature as an autonomous “world republic of letters” with Paris at its aesthetic Mecca (“Literature as a World” 192), admits that there are “structural inequalities” integral to this global space of textual exchange that distinguishes “international” from “national” writers, and highlights the former’s struggle to win recognition in a journey from the marginal “spaces lacking in literary resources” to the hegemonic “pole of greatest autonomy” located, for the most part, *à Paris* (200).

It is my first contention that both Moretti and Casanova, as vigilant as they are to expose the inequities jeopardizing travelling texts, are pathologically entrenched in the dichotomy between the hegemonic “core” and the struggling “periphery” of their imagined world order, so much so that they remain oblivious to the inner dynamics of complex literary traditions rooted in the geographical, historical, and cultural circumstances that mandate artistic expression. The overreliance of both on such taxonomic designations that separate the West from the Rest runs the risk of entrapment in the threefold problematic, according to Damrosch, that threatens the study of World Literature today: Turning “culturally deracinated,” becoming “philologically bankrupt,” and growing “ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism” (“Discussion” 365).

For instance, Moretti's untiring insistence on the core-periphery divide (which, as I will demonstrate, even distorts his reading of *Moby-Dick*) leads him to argue that the production of the novel away from the major capitals of Western Europe is "*always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials" ("Conjectures" 163). Self-conscious of his own flattening approach to the so-called non-Western novel, of course, Moretti does add to his formula the possibility of a "local *narrative* voice" (ibid), a gesture that resembles a token of colonial benevolence since the argument concludes without a single case of textual evidence. Furthermore, Casanova's declaration that every writer of international stature must follow a standard of "literary present," termed "the Greenwich Meridian of literature" ("Literature as a World" 196), is unabashedly Eurocentric in measuring world literatures along the lines of Euro-American modernity. Even at her progressive best, as she endeavors to transcend national borders and international power dynamics, Casanova labors under the paradoxical notion that "writers from the periphery" should pursue "recognition strategies that would be both subversive and effective" (204). Such treatments only give moral high ground to those in power who *give*, and eternally marginal status to those who *seek* validation.

A revealing example, through which I proceed to lay out my theoretical framework in conversation with Hamid Dabashi, is Casanova's take on Sadeqh Hedayat, the Iranian novelist who committed suicide in 1951 while residing in Paris. Buried in Père Lachaise cemetery along with Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust, Hedayat's final resting place is, if anything, a testament to the literary career of a cosmopolitan visionary that dwelled in Iran, India, and France. For Casanova, however, Hedayat's was a "tragic life" that only vouches for "the terrible situation" of the peripheral writer fatally doomed in the cultural centre of the universe, Paris (*Republic of Letters* 239). In other words, Hedayat's suicide, the reason of which should for art's sake rest with his tortured genius in Père Lachaise, is for Casanova a dehumanizing metaphor to magnify an imaginary gap between the global centre and circumference. Still more disturbingly, as she foregrounds the geopolitical

significance of Hedayat's death in Paris (as opposed to, say, in Tehran or Delhi), Casanova seeks recourse in broad generalizations that interrupt the historical continuity of Persian literary traditions spanning from at least the first-century SH (seventh-century AD) to the present-day. Casanova, who has already limited the global space available to non-Euro-American literatures to only the postcolonial era ("Literature as a World" 195), dehistoricizes Hedayat and his body of work as an exemplary case of literary paralysis in "culturally despoiled countries" such as Iran (*Republic of Letters* 239).

In words that indicate her sheer disregard for local histories and formative geographies, Casanova categorically reduces the wide expanse of a Persianate world across Western and Central Asia into an "underprivileged space" in which "cultural resources" only belong to "the vestiges of a prestigious ancient civilization" (*Republic of Letters* 238). Thus, in examining Hedayat's chronic depression as a symptom of perpetual obscurity under "the shadow" of a francophonic core, Casanova issues her final diagnosis in complete textual vacuum and contextual darkness. Namely, that Hedayat "found himself caught between an inaccessible literary modernity and a national grandeur that had all but disappeared" (239). Eventually, Hedayat's corpus in anthologies of World Literature is a cause lost between the ruins of tradition in the eastern edges of the periphery, and the monopoly of European modernity at the French heart of a "world republic of letters."

Aamir Mufti, who offers a critique of Casanova's Eurocentrism in "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," calls to "revisit" the discipline beyond the "disjunctures and relations of force" that are scattered "at various levels of world literary space" (338). In a roadmap for progressive criticism, Mufti recasts the idea of World Literature on both curricular and commercial grounds, hoping "to reveal the ways in which 'diversity' itself—national, civilizational, continental—is a colonial and Orientalist problematic" (339). In effect, any attempt that seeks to revisit and

rethink World Literature must in Mufti's judgment be "confronted with linguistic heterogeneity," and be "uncoupled from the effects of standardization and homogenization both within and across languages and cultures that come masked as diversity" (ibid). Sailing across the ocean of current methodologies and approaches to world literatures, Mufti calls neither for "distant reading" nor "close reading for its own sake." Rather, it is "*better* close reading" that proves "attentive to the worldliness of language and text at various levels of social reality, from the highly localized to the planetary as such" (ibid).

Unsettled by theoretical obsessions with the core-periphery divide, polarizing our planet from an imperial watchtower, and informing a range of institutions from World Literature to the library facilitating my research, I find in Mufti's open-ended manifesto a constructive point of departure. It is therefore my assertion that an execution of Comparative Literature beyond the geopolitical dynamic in which the Western core entices its peripheral Rest will advocate geographical maps that enable cross-cultural dialogue in equal terms. It will also introduce modes of reading that promote a cosmopolitan imagination rarely endorsed by world literary proponents who rather *decontextualize* in the name of *diversity*.

The trajectory of my revisionary interventions into American and Persian literatures is, perforce, a trans-temporal passage into the fabric of time and space, from nineteenth-century America to twentieth-century Iran, by which a rethinking of World Literature occurs against local and global sites of violence that form exclusive national Canons and, by Goethean lengths, a "world republic of letters." Travelling on board the *Pequod* to Fassih's *The Story of Javid* and Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch*, before a brief sojourn with Amir Naderi's film *The Runner*, a critical act of border-crossing beyond the panoptic checkpoints at international borders constitutes my free translation of what Mufti terms "*better* close reading." The effort will at once subvert the racial, class, and gender inequalities that define a text as solely American or Iranian, and transcend the curatorial aggression that subjects

the work to a global mode of circulation—such as the one negotiated between *The Blind Owl* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* at the University of Sheffield.

### Transcending the West

In order to eclipse the hegemonic map of the world, and arrive at a productive point of departure between American and Persian literatures, it is imperative to gain “a new organicity,” in Hamid Dabashi’s words, “in the voice and vision of the postcolonial critic” (PO 272). Towards a critique of the postcolonial condition in *Post-Orientalism*, Dabashi endeavors to reimagine the world through a camera, crafted with “dual, complementary lenses” (125), which merges the “defiant political engagement” of Edward Said with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “critique of the European dismantling of the sovereign subject” (272). The result, bound to unshackle the postcolonial thinker from the delimiting confines of a cartographic monopoly, will “put an end to the idea of ‘Europe,’ or *a fortiori* ‘the West’ as the principle interlocutor of the world” (ibid).

In an argument emphatically titled “I Am Not a Subalternist,” Dabashi interrogates a parallel set of limitations that Spivak (in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) and Said (throughout his scholarship) pose to postcolonial criticism. Firstly, although Spivak has effectively radicalized a critique of post-structuralism in sublating her readings of Marx and Derrida towards “a more planetary emancipation of the de-subjected postcolonial,” mainly the *oppressed woman of color*, she ultimately falls prey to “a para-geographical metaphor” (PO 127–9). That is, however successful to challenge a definitive range of progressive thinkers from Foucault to Deleuze who think have deconstructed the *cogito ergo sum* principle, Spivak is “so metaphorically fixated in a peripheral ‘East’ that she cannot but authenticate the white European intellectuals and the sovereign subject they think they have dismantled to its ‘West’” (129). Entrenched within “the East-West binary tunnel,” in other words, Spivak’s problem is not simply “geographical” but

indeed “thematic, epistemic, [and] theoretical” to the extent that the subalternist actually dissolves in “an imaginary location,” eastward and into the peripheral heart of darkness, that fails to view the so-called West as the ideological construct that it truly is (ibid). As a result, Dabashi proceeds, Spivak runs the risk of going politically moot (despite being theoretically potent) once she arrives at her conclusive case in point, the practice of *sati* or widow sacrifice in the Indian subcontinent. Determined to rest her case against a fictitious Euro-American gentlemen cloaked as the sovereign subject, Spivak has decontextualized the sacred Manusmṛti, and has paradoxically undermined her own “radical discursive critique” through the “counter-ritual, suicide” of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri (130–2).

By the same token, Dabashi turns to Said’s lifelong project of “salvaging (European) humanism via a democratic criticism,” suggesting that much like Spivak’s political persuasion, Said’s theoretical angle is trapped inside a “bifurcated consciousness” that is perpetually “committed to an us-and-a-them axis that ipso facto has to accommodate the slanted relation of power between the European Subject and the unnamed subjects of the Other of Europe” (PO 136). Concerned with Said’s ambivalent defence of his intellectual commitment in the posthumous *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*—namely that “it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism,” and that “schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan” (10)—Dabashi opines that such “conservative insistence on humanism” is, compared with Spivak, “politically far more potent” yet “theoretically halting” (PO 135). In other words, determined to negotiate a subject position within the core-periphery divide, Said seems to have disregarded the possibility that the point-blank reality of power-relations, upon the site of struggle and within postcolonial criticism, simply “Europeanizes the Subject” (138).

In juxtaposing the two leading proponents of subaltern and postcolonial studies, Dabashi claims “that neither Spivak nor Said has kept a



safe distance from the sovereignty of that European Subject” because the former engages in a “head-on collision with the European Sovereign Subject from its theoretical left,” while the latter partakes in a “defiant humanism that makes him politically progressive but epistemically seriously compromised” (PO 138). Both, as a result, mislead the postcolonial thinker towards “a liminal space that is neither *here* [in the abstracted West] nor *there* [the Orientalized East], thus authenticating the metaphysical authenticity of both *here* and *there*” (ibid). Dabashi’s alternative path, proving crucial to my methodology, is a bridge between Said’s “defiant political engagement” (exemplified in his question of Palestine) and Spivak’s “critique of the European dismantling of the sovereign subject” (through her postmodern antihumanism, PO 272). The altar of this “auspicious wedding,” Dabashi hopes, lies beyond the East-West binary, and “on a *critical geography* that decentres the planet without reversing its dominant order in cross-essentializing terms” (138–9, emphasis added).

For instance, rather than confronting or else embracing Hegel’s philosophy of history over his singling out of Persian civilization as a *pre-historical* moment of grandeur preceding the European beginning of time in Ancient Greece, Dabashi calls for “a recasting of the world map in which primacy ought to be given to local geographies, to the polylocality of our historical exigencies, the polyvocality of our voices, and the polyfocality of our visions” (PO 145). Thus, Dabashi’s response to Hegel, which is more productive than a comparative decontextualization of local texts to challenge the European philosopher, appreciates the external reality of aesthetic and cultural phenomena irrespective of the politics of misrepresentation inherent to dialogues of East and West. The issue at stake, to return to my earlier examples, is not whether Ben Affleck ought to correct his flawed vision in *Argo* or whether the Islamic Republic should make a public spectacle of it at the US embassy. Rather, we must discern the dynamics through which visionaries such as Melville, Fassih, Dowlatabadi, and Naderi have invariably rendered both efforts futile and categorically redundant to the aesthetics of their literary worlds. Pertinent to my attempts at rising above

the geographical dichotomies hidden throughout comparative literary studies and institutional World Literature, Dabashi suggests that the real challenge to a “power-basing historiography,” be it Hegel’s philosophy of history or Ishmael’s narrative of survival, “is the border-crossing of Persian and Parsees into India, of Arabic and Islam into Iran” (PO 145). Such moments of sheer transparency are simple but profound historic events that occur beyond the reductive scope of postcolonial cartographies.

I must pause and ponder over Dabashi’s examples here as I seek to find a reflection of Fedallah’s faint image, and spell out an account of his untold story in the realm of Iranian fiction. If Fedallah’s voice, which remains unacknowledged in the body of Melville scholarship, is mystified due to his clairvoyant role as Ahab’s *prophet*, then the *already-fulfilled* prophecies of Fassih’s Javid, Dowlatabadi’s Mergan, and Naderi’s Amiru—as the Parsee’s soul mates in parallel universes—will symbolically retrieve an untold story in *Moby-Dick*. It is by virtue of Javid, Mergan, and Amiru’s embeddedness in their “local geographies” of urban Tehran, rural Khurasan, and industrial Khuzistan respectively, that I propose to expand Fedallah’s horizons beyond the limits of the American Canon. It is, furthermore, through Fassih, Dowlatabadi, and Naderi’s “polyvocal” narratives and “polyfocal” worldliness that I propose a critique of Fedallah’s role, inscribed in Melville’s subversive text but silenced in American literary history (PO 145). By transcending the “principle interlocutor” that Dabashi exposes in the polarized perspective of postcolonial criticism (272), a revisionary reading of Melville through the works of his Iranian literary and cinematic counterparts will de-territorialize Fedallah towards a radical futurity, when no text is ever denied the right to de-center the reader’s perspective and change the world.

The pathbreaking notion of “a new organicity” unshackles the postcolonial critic from the vicious cycle of demarcating the West from the Rest in an infinitely expanding universe across which any sense of geographic certainty is a mere illusion. The notion is also conducive to my harmonizing treatment of two literary traditions at the centre and

circumference of the “world literary system.” As I approach an array of American and Iranian novels further on, and explore the ramifications of reciting *Moby-Dick* in 1953 Tehran in a search of Fedallah’s marginalized presence, Dabashi suggests that transcending the Euro-American “interlocutor” of the postcolonial agenda is not simply a “political project” but also a “literary proposition,” one to be pursued in the realms of literature and criticism (PO 272).

### **Rethinking World Literature from American Literature to Persian *Adab***

The reference in *Post-Orientalism* to a literary case of “altered interlocutor” is the Persian translation of James Morier’s nineteenth-century Oriental novel, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, by Mirza Habib Isfahani (272–5). “An Orientalist project *par excellence*,” the original text is in Abbas Amanat’s words an amalgam of “direct knowledge about Persia” documented by Morier, a British spy of a six-year tenure in Iran, and imbued with “a decidedly hostile and satirical overtone.” A biased account of life in Iran seen through the eyes of a cunning rascal named Hajji Baba in the early Qajar period (1785–1925), the novel “lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent” (ibid).

Nevertheless, once rendered into Persian by the dissident Mirza Habib Isfahani on the verge of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1907), Morier’s vicious dramatization of Persians turns, by virtue of a free translation, into a self-reflexive window into a society in turmoil, inflicted by both domestic and colonial tyranny. As Kamran Rastegar demonstrates, the textual circulation of *Hajji Baba* between Britain and Iran demonstrates “the paradoxical appropriation of this text for both colonialist-orientalist as well as anti-colonialist revolutionary imaginaries” (“Unintended Gift” 252). As Morier revalidated the centrality of his Occidental privilege vis-à-vis the exotic Other in *Hajji Baba*, Mirza Habib and his Persian-speaking audience “were historically positioned” within the right historical frame “to translate

for themselves the imaginary spaces of the book as relating to the material struggles they were engaged in" (262).

While Mirza Habib Isfahani's rejuvenated *Hajji Baba* exemplifies the radical dissolution of a colonialist text in favor of a revolutionary context, a more interesting parallel that readjusts my lens on the American scene is C. L. R. James's subversive reading of *Moby-Dick*, titled *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Exploding right at the heart of empire, James's turn to Melville occurred in 1952 when the Trinidadian cultural critic was put into custody on Ellis Island, on the verge of deportation, for having led a Trotskyist splinter group for fifteen years. As reported by The New York Times commemorating the century of his birth, James marked the period of his detention by channeling his frustration with the US state security into literary criticism, focusing on "Herman Melville's epic tale about a ship's deadly pursuit of a great white whale" (Eakin). Revisiting the novel from the standpoint of the *Pequod's* multi-ethnic mariners, and opposing the "frame narrative" of Melville scholarship during the Cold War, which tended to polarize the text between Ahab's totalitarian rule and Ishmael's liberal values (Pease "NS" 35), James subverted the "interpretive consensus" that predetermined the crew's submission, doom, and lack of agency (ibid).

The publication of *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* following James's detention in 1953, the very year Kermit Roosevelt arrived in Tehran to initiate Operation AJAX, is only a coincidence compared with the textual capacity that the Persian character Fedallah offers to a reading of *Moby-Dick* beyond Ellis Island. As I will demonstrate through Donald Pease's retrieval of James's work from the buried annals of the Cold War, there lies a hitherto-unacknowledged voice, termed a "proleptic narrative," at the margins of Ishmael's story of survival, which, granted, extends the interpretive boundaries of the text beyond James's postwar challenge to American literature. Building on James's early work to revisit *Moby-Dick* against the exclusive terms of a national Canon, I formulate the notion of Fedallah's

“proleptic narrative” (born but not confined to Melville’s work) to reexamine the *Pequod*’s presence in the de-centred world that I occupy as a de-territorialized critic. Inspired by Mirza Habib Isfahani’s dismantling of what Dabashi termed the white European “interlocutor” of James Morier’s *Hajji Baba*, I will reimagine Melville’s productive position amongst a selection of Iranian novels in order to hear echoes of Fedallah’s voice in a cross-cultural context.

Following his return from relative obscurity in the 1920s in the period known as “Melville Revival,” a distinctly “masculine” and “Anglo-Saxon” identity was for decades part and parcel of Melville’s image to ideologically celebrate a “powerful artistic beacon against the dangers presented by the [immigrant] masses” of postwar America (Lauter 6). This ivory tower, which was constructed to cherish Melville in the coming decades as a “weapon in the Cold War” (Pease, “AS” 137), celebrated *Moby-Dick* as the definitive master-text to reflect the United States’ hegemonic power within and beyond its borders. Similarly, in appraising Melville’s work as World Literature, chief proponents of the discipline like Franco Moretti have conformed to twentieth-century formation of the national Canon to accentuate the text’s culture of imperialism. In *Modern Epic*, Moretti foregrounds a selection of Euro-American texts such as the German *Faust* and the American *Moby-Dick* as semi-peripheral but super-canonical novels that, all together, manifest the power dynamics governing the “world literary system.” Moretti’s specific reading of *Moby-Dick*, which I will argue is predicated on an act of strategic mischief towards Fedallah’s marginality, treats the novel as a “world text” that determines the supremacy of Melville’s work atop the hierarchy of global literary exchange (ME 33–4).

As the first step in rethinking the idea of World Literature, I believe that a close examination of Fedallah the Parsee, the most dehumanized of Melville’s outcasts, symbolically unearths a bracing account of *Moby-Dick* that goes against the grain of the text as either “American” or “World Literature” – both of which travel as ethno- and Eurocentric constructs. As

Edward Said concurs, “the history of ideas and comparative literature,” as they both inform my principle concerns here, “do not routinely authorize in their practitioners quite the same Goethean sense of a concert of all literatures and ideas” (“Travelling Theory” 197). That is, without a committed sense of “critical consciousness” when dealing with seafaring texts, and without responding to problematic issues that theoretical re-appropriations often entail, it would be difficult “to provide resistance to theory,” or “to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests” (211). As I look at the itinerant *Pequod* that carries *Moby-Dick* the world over, I view Ishmael’s narrative neither only as a nationally conceived master-text (since the periods of “Melville Revival” followed by the Cold War) nor only as a globally writ large “world text” (after Moretti). Instead, with Fedallah’s untold story, or “proleptic narrative,” at a new epicentre of the text, I propose to destabilize the novel off the imperial centre of the “world literary system,” and render any core-periphery divide redundant to the forthcoming arrival at Fedallah’s ancestral home imagined in the realm of Persian literature and Iranian cinema.

It is from this point, beginning with a study of Fedallah’s immediate (and culturally authentic) kin in Fasih’s Javid followed by a reading of his defiant alter ego (and better half) in Dowlatabadi’s Mergan that I engage with the second and more significant aspect of Dabashi’s “literary proposition.” Namely, “a rich literary output” followed by “a multi-faceted cinematic tradition” in contemporary Iran (PO 176) align the emancipated *Moby-Dick* with three pioneering counterparts. Such trans-temporal and cross-cultural exchange between American and Persian literatures, occurring away from the West and towards the Rest of the “world literary system,” enables my ultimate escape from the institution of World Literature, envisioning instead a democratic multiplicity of literary worlds including but not exclusive to Iran and the United States.

In his seminal essay “To World, to Globalize,” Djelal Kadir suggests that we think of the “world” of World Literature as a verb, and subsequently

“read globalization not as boundless sweep but as bounding circumscription” (265–66). The point being made is that the simultaneous rise to prominence of economic globalization “from decidedly local and uncontested sites of power and self-interest” together with the emergence of discourse of World Literature “among practitioners of comparative literature” are intertwined issues worthy of critical examination (265). It is Kadir’s argument that the conception of a floating-signifier as the *world* itself “correlates ideologically with cultural and political thresholds at traumatic cusps of history” (268). As we bear witness in the twenty-first century to a “flattened world” of market capitalism, and in return find “an array of counter-movements of heightened inequality, cultural and religious conflict, and expansionist realpolitik,” it is only fair to question what and for whom the “world” of World Literature actually signifies (268). Upon the orbit of a *globalized* planet and its *worlded* literatures, it is crucial to interrogate the “subject agencies” and “object predicates” of both verbs (269)—and beware, following Ishmael, of harpooners and their Loose-Fish.

The taken-for-granted notion of our planetary life, which is in hegemonic English universalized as the “world,” complicates my shift in paradigm from the nineteenth-century America of *Moby-Dick* to the contemporary Iran of *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch*. It in fact emerges as a philosophical concern in Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature*, where she calls for Comparative Literature “to be more responsive to the geopolitics of literary worlds as they occur in real time” (39). Because discourses of World Literature are idealistically geared to promote a liberal humanist perspective by way of weaving together a wide disarray of singularities, Apter maintains that the discipline bears “the collateral effect of blunting political critique” (41). In other words, in the course of the facile inclusion of a range of “geographically emptied” labels such as Islam and the West, and of mapping the world based on the latter’s imperious distance from the former as Near, Middle, or Far East, Comparative Literature is in constant danger of “reproducing neo-imperialist cartographies” (40–42).

Offering a solution, Apter proposes that we treat the world more as an “Untranslatable,” a key term throughout her scholarship that points to the significance of approaching textual phenomena within their own linguistic, cultural, and historical habitats before catapulting them into comparative frameworks (1–3). Apter’s specific citation of the universally privileged *Welt* of the Goethean *Weltliteratur*, for instance, makes note of a “Euro-Romantic, neo-Hegelian, Marxist and humanist pedigree” that reveals its entanglement to “Biblical and Enlightenment notions of time” (5, 182). Taking a stand against the unexamined application of the word beyond its legitimate environment in Euro-American traditions, Apter promotes a fresh “philosophical cartography” in which the fabric of intelligent life on Earth is also examined in terms and experiences lived in non-European languages (186). To fly from the English-speaking world of Melville to *jahan-i Farsi zaban* occupied by Fassih and Dowlatabadi, it is important to envision a global space in which “all wheels are turning and no point of orientation is consistently privileged” (189). Thus, rather than re-orienting institutional World Literature to, let us imagine, replace the centrality of Paris and the Nobel Prize with that of Tehran and the Golshiri Award, Apter thinks instead towards the autonomy of “heterocosms,” an expansive geography of “alternative worlds accessible to all” (190).

Arriving now at Fedallah’s literary counterparts, Dabashi suggests in *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* that the recognition of “multiple global maps” and “their palimpsestic juxtapositions” throughout human history is essential if we are to fully appreciate “the worldliness of cultural productions domestic to these universes” (163). Much like Apter’s plea to heed the Untranslatability of different worldviews lest an overriding globality disallows their claim to history, he highlights the necessity of viewing Persian as “a *worldly* (not a ‘world’) literature” (220). Thus revisiting the millennial history of Persian literature from the birth of a courtly poetic tradition since the Arab conquest of Sasanian Persia in the seventh-century to that of a complex literary and visual tradition following the encounter with European imperialism in the nineteenth-century, Dabashi observes the



imperial pedigree and further development of Persian literary imagination into a revolutionary venture, and ultimately proposes “a reading of Persian literature as a mode of literary humanism” (hereafter cited as *Adab*, *PLH* 40). Positing his restorative lens against the backdrop of “Orientalism” (informing discourses of World Literature) and “nativism” (distorting the edifice of National Literature), Dabashi’s project is to reconcile the tapestry of Persian *Adab* with “a cosmopolitan worldliness that has always been its natural habitat” (*ibid*).

The idea of re-worlding the universal notion of “literature” towards a site-specific case of “literary humanism” in the Persianate world entails an understanding of *Adab* as an institution that has first and foremost refused to remain captive under the totalizing influence of its historical counterparts. For instance, the *Adami* of early Persian poetry, translated as “human[ity]” and defined as “the decentered subject at the heart of the literary act,” is a resourceful trope that persistently evades fixed and normative identity categories (*PLH* 6–8). As a result, upon its early encounter with Islamic scholasticism, Persian *Adab* develops as “a narrative institution unto itself” that is “irreducible to any metaphysical certainty” that could inform its aesthetic mores (10). Furthermore, in its cultural transformations over the course of expanding Muslim territories for over a thousand years until the emergence of postcolonial nation-states (including present-day Iran), Persian *Adab* was, as it remains, “the result of the societal formation of a multicultural and polyvocal urbanism entirely independent of the political needs of those empires and deeply rooted in their cosmopolitan characters” (12). In other words, in dwelling the Islamic courts like “a Trojan horse” simultaneously “entertaining” and “disturbing their dreams,” serving and subverting their imperial majesties (16), Persian literati dared to imagine “an aesthetic cosmopolitanism” and ventured to dream “an expansive worldliness” by articulating their “decentered and polysemous subjects” (36).

Whereas it is neither the objective nor the scope of my thesis to broach the subject of early Persian poetry, acknowledging the textual manifestation of the historical continuum that is the world of Persian *Adab* is an imperative. Unlike Pascale Casanova who, as noted before, believes that the twentieth-century fiction of a Paris-bound Sadegh Hedayat is morbidly lost between a bygone literary past and an impossible future, the organic embeddedness of Fassihi, Dowlatbadi, and Naderi in the Persianate world is a running motif throughout my scholarship. To be precise and pertinent to my choice of Iranian texts, Dabashi's discussion of the multi-faceted subject of *Adab* demonstrates that an inspired attitude to resist power is the legacy that contemporary Iranian poetry, fiction, and cinema have inherited from their predecessors. Despite the fact that the rich tapestry of "Persian" *Adab* has itself been made possible at the expense of silencing "the non-Persian element" (PLH 20), a potential spirit of revolt has nevertheless been part of the "amorphous" subject at the heart of its poetic personae. "These varied and variegated seeds of embedded discontent," from the epic audacity of Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* to the lyrical resilience in *Ghazals* of Hafiz, were all destined to sustain "the nineteenth- and twentieth-century transmutation" of *Adab* into "a robust, transgressive, and revolutionary version of itself" as Persianate societies faced and resisted British, Soviet, and American imperialisms (37).

More specifically, given my corrective lens on the Cold War temporality of *Moby-Dick* with regard to Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," I view *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch*, two contemporary Iranian novels produced in the latter decades of the twentieth-century, as works of fiction that resonate in the long aftermath of August 1953, when the CIA-sponsored coup against Musaddiq's government re-shaped the fabric of social and political life in Iran. As such, the selected works of Fassihi and Dowlatbadi are "*new historical novels*," in Hasan Mir-Abidini's words, which mark the growth of genre to a means of "critical inquiry into contemporary history" (471). Accordingly, with the Pahlavi era as historical setting (1925–1979), and the post-1953 trauma as a political subtext, "a people are depicted while

experiencing history,” namely, in late-Qajar Tehran during the 1920s in *The Story of Javid* and the rural setting of Khurasan during the 1960s in *Missing Soluch* (472). The protagonists Javid and Mergan, rooted in their respective historical contexts, are “participant observers” whose experiences of a formative array of local and global issues are closely tied to the “social upheavals” that each literary world attempts to convey (ibid). The representation of the individual as an essentialized archetype of masculinity in the Zoroastrian figure of Javid, and a portrayal of resourceful femininity in the character of the rural laborer Mergan, reveals the impact of “societal forces” on the characters and their developments (ibid). In short, the combative fascination of both figures with conceptions of Iranian *land*, figuratively for Javid and literally for Mergan, shed light on a range of significant issues that form the basis of a comparative dialogue with the Parsee Fedallah.

Furthermore, considering the trajectory proposed in Dabashi’s historical re-sequencing of Persian *Adab*, the texts under scrutiny here reflect the phase of “*chaos*,” an open-ended era of artistic expression ranging from poetry and fiction to theater and cinema, which has occurred in the nationally conceived “public space” of “*vatan*” [homeland] (PLH 264). At the crossroads with “colonial modernity” since the nineteenth-century, literary endeavors in contemporary Iran have collectively evolved a normative “*will to power*” to a subversive “*will to resist power*,” occupying a homeland that is essentially “transnational,” and which provides the artist with “a renewed cosmopolitanism” to observe and participate in the world (222, 226, 247, 264). The above reference to Mirza Habib Isfahani’s translation of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* – as an Iranian anti-colonial parallel to C. L. R. James’s Melvillean vision on Ellis Island – represents the literary act in such state of “*chaos*.” As with contemporary Iranian fiction, unlike Moretti who deems the non-Western novel as a moribund case of “compromise between foreign forms and local materials” (“Conjectures” 163), I maintain in tandem with Dabashi that the production of contemporary Iranian fiction is one amongst the plethora of “disruptive” articulations of “subjection and

agency,” which have been historically destined to materialize in the world of Persian *Adab* – “on multiple, variant, and inconclusive registers” (PLH 250).

*The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* are novels written during and published in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which look back at historical watersheds during the Pahlavi era, and foreground two protagonists as oppressed but resilient characters that strive to assert themselves despite all odds. Regarding the “public space” of *vatan* as site of literary expression, an aesthetic embeddedness in figurative and literal conceptions of Iranian *land* binds the two narratives, and inspires their protagonists to reveal their strengths and weaknesses, potentials and blind spots, particularly vis-à-vis their enactments of gender. Furthermore, with regard to my critique of World Literature from American literature to Persian *Adab*, I submit that the *inward* attachments of Javid and Mergan to territorial *land* unfold against the *outward* course of Ishmael’s narrative into the *sea*, and provide fertile ground for the emancipating retrieval of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative.”

Fassih’s *The Story of Javid* centres on a Zoroastrian boy who is archetypically, historically, and nationally characterized within “*khak-i garm-i dasht-i Iran*” [the warm soil of the plains of Iran”] (7). Accordingly, Javid is characterized as a highly portentous ideal of masculinity, whose ordeals establish him as a national trope. Compared with *Moby-Dick*, the novel contains a culturally authentic parallel to Fedallah in that Javid is a distinctly Zoroastrian figuration who has a specifically strategic function for both the narrator as well as his author. Summoned as significant characters in the *seaward* passage of *Moby-Dick* and the *landed* terrain of *The Story of Javid*, Fedallah and Javid partake in an interesting dialogue with suggestive implications for the current international affairs involving Iran and the United States. Nonetheless, in so far as Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” is concerned, Javid can hardly resonate the muffled defiance of Fedallah because his gendered attachment to Iranian *land* is too encapsulating a trope

as he articulates his issues, more like Ishmael than Fedallah, at the expense of otherwise vocal female characters in the narrative.

In *Missing Soluch*, however, Dowlatabadi has established a rural woman as the resilient guardian of “*Khuda Zamin*” [God’s Land], a stretch of barren earth on the outskirts of the deprived village of Zaminej in the eastern province of Khurasan (179). Mergan’s relentless attitude to optimistically preserve her livelihood against the unforgiving forces of nature and industry defines her character as a resourceful and uncompromising woman. Furthermore, aligned with her literary counterparts elsewhere in this thesis, Mergan stands out as the figure to fully articulate Fedallah’s untold story. Unlike Javid, whose landed nationalism culminates in sexism, Mergan’s embeddedness in “God’s Land” is a far more redemptive notion. Despite bearing etymological roots in the Zoroastrian ritual of *Mihrgan*, a potential link to Fedallah which Dowlatabadi has personally encouraged me to highlight, I shall refrain from studying her as a blood relation, proposing instead to view her as a gendered and classed body whose textually delivered ordeals rejuvenate Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative.” As I elaborate in the coming chapters, Mergan’s ultimate wedding to Fedallah, merging the best that American literature and Persian *Adab* have to offer to a de-centered world, shall vocalize Fedallah’s tall tale *past* Fassih’s nationalist and masculinist dogma, *beyond* Melville’s textual and epistemic violence, and *against* the canonical establishment of *Moby-Dick* as a “world text” and *Missing Soluch* as World Literature.

Admittedly, the idea of aligning Fedallah—across a century and two oceans—with Javid and Mergan does on the face of it seem far-fetched if not outlandish. Yet the fact that Melville is, beyond his antebellum immediacy, a twentieth-century inclusion in the Canon of American literature indicates that the *Pequod*’s journey is destined to be open-ended. An assessment of the status of *Moby-Dick* as a Cold War allegory does, if anything, suggest that a “proleptic” mode of reading has at least once been imposed on the text: a parochial act of decorating Melville against the Iron Curtain, reflecting one

but denying multiple layers of the text, and leading the audience to simplify an encyclopedic epic to a mere conflict between a liberal Ishmael and totalitarian Ahab. Therefore, my placement of *Moby-Dick* on the same shelf as *The Story of Javid*, *Missing Soluch*, and in conclusion *The Runner* is not so much an enforced execution of Comparative Literature as, indeed, a productive effort to de-familiarize the reader from the common knowledge about the text, within and beyond the US, as a bifurcated allegory with no heteroglossic potential. With an appreciation of Fedallah's role by virtue of his reflections in contemporary Iranian fiction and cinema, *Moby-Dick* will re-emerge to bring about the cosmopolitan vision that Melville had initially (however, as we shall note, timidly) aspired to achieve in his *magnum opus*.

In *Rethinking World Literature from Moby Dick to Missing Soluch*, Fedallah the Parsee acts as a literary messenger, running between two politically entangled but culturally giving geographical spheres: Iran and the United States. During the course of this journey, which begins in nineteenth-century New England and culminates in twentieth-century Khurasan, Fedallah and his counterparts Javid and Mergan envision an imaginative geography over the epistemic cores and above the dehistoricized peripheries of a "world literary system" that all together deny cross-cultural exchange in egalitarian terms. Accordingly, I maintain that a reading of the literary text by way of transcending the West as our world's "principle interlocutor" (Dabashi *PO* 272) shall expand the horizons currently visible to comparative literary studies. Regarding *Moby-Dick*, it is my assertion that a retrieval of Fedallah's voice against the currents of Ishmael's *seaward* narrative of Americanness unearths a subversive layer of Melville's work so far unacknowledged in interpretations of the novel as either a national or worldly master-text. As with *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch*, I note that a reexamination of Javid and Mergan's roles as markedly gendered and classed figures in *landed* narratives of Iranianness enables a study of contemporary Iranian fiction as embedded in the transnational "public space" of homeland that resists a reading of either work as myopically local or reductively global (*PLH* 265).

In search of Fedallah's voice, then, I write towards a conversation between the de-territorialized American literature and the de-colonized Persian *Adab* to demonstrate that the textually delivered stories of Javid (as a Zoroastrian national trope) and Mergan (as a marginalized rural woman) emerge as significant parallels to Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." In-between the outward *sea* of Melville's subversive mind and the inward *land* of Fassih and Dowlatabadi's moral imaginations, there is an alternative space—despite the West and towards the Rest—in which the literary text, and the aesthetic as political, enable the border-crossing of fictional characters towards a multiverse of literary worlds against the monopoly of an expansive and totalizing World Literature.

### Rehearsal of Arguments

Articulating Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," the following three chapters unfold over the tripartite moments of *Moby-Dick*—from the nineteenth-century to the Cold War to our open-ended present. The immediate textuality of Fedallah as a Parsee harpooner haunting Melville's subversive imagination in antebellum America, calls for research not only in the origins of the character but, more revealingly, in the literary emergence of Zoroastrian figurations in present-day Iran, where Fedallah's historical roots converge. Fassih's *The Story of Javid* is an interesting case in point as it predicates the title character's national identity on a pre-Islamic idea of Iranianness. Considering the canonical revival of Melville's work following the liberal anti-communist consensus, I proceed with the geopolitical ramifications of reimagining Fedallah with regard to the character's Zoroastrian undertones in a comparison with Fassih's Javid, and then arrive at its subversive overtones vis-à-vis Dowlatabadi's Mergan. Thereby, the twentieth-century celebration of *Moby-Dick* as a "weapon in the Cold War" as well as a "world text" is potentially countered in the world of Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch*, a novel concerned with local and global consequences of the Cold War in a derelict Iranian village. This story of a

rural woman's defiance of intertwined sites of patriarchal, national, and neocolonial tyranny provides the ultimate manifestation of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" in my thesis.

As I draw on Fedallah and his Persian literary counterparts to carry out a critique of World Literature, I intervene into American and Iranian national Canons, expose sites of local and global inequality, and proceed to reflect the power of literature and constructive literary criticism to enable an egalitarian dialogue amongst a plurality of literary words. As a symbolic gesture, thus, my three textual analyses are titled as wordplays with Ishmael's narrative opening to *Moby-Dick*. The self-perpetuating sentence that famously begins his story of survival, "Call me Ishmael" (MD 25), gives way with a leap of critical imagination to the subversive "Call Me Fedallah" of the second chapter. Further on, Fasih's attempts in *The Story of Javid* to humanize an emblem of national grandeur through the ordeals of a Zoroastrian boy form a reflection of Fedallah's immediate kin in the third chapter, "Call Him Javid." In the fourth chapter, Dowlatabadi's literary engagements with the protagonist of *Missing Soluch* leads, at critical watersheds in Iranian history during the 1960s and 70s, to a representation of femininity that reveals the author's attempts, as radical as Melville's birth to Fedallah, to "Call Her Mergan."

In the second chapter, "Call Me Fedallah: Reading a Proleptic Narrative in *Moby-Dick*," I am chiefly concerned with American Orientalism, which is historically essentialist and presently Islamophobic. Timothy Marr has traced the roots of the US perceptions of Islam to the antebellum era within a body of knowledge he calls "American Islamicism." In the colonial and early national periods, American cultural productions rendered an oppositional view of the Orient according to which "Islam signified antichristian imposture" while the fledgling nation of "America cherished enlightened democracy" (10). As the decades preceding the Civil War gave way to the romantic but equally reductive gaze of "comparative orientalism," prevalent amongst the Transcendentalists as well as the



dissident Melville, the Islamic Orient became a mode of “exotic alterity” that at once signified “the universality of American cultural power” and “the allure of domestic and material productions” (13). In the modern era, given the geopolitical stakes and increasing involvement of the United States in the so-called Middle East since WWII, discourses of knowledge and power have in Edward Said’s words recharged Orientalist thought with a response to the “part fiction, part ideological label” of “Islam” as, simply, “traumatic news” (CI x). Said’s critique of the media frenzy towards the Hostage Crisis of 1979–80 in Tehran as “a victory of dark over light” following the disruption of US global hegemony in post-revolutionary Iran (6) is a harbinger of what would in less than three decades be the vicious Islamophobia of post-9/11 US culture. Within the cultural realm, because the nineteenth-century characterization and twentieth-century receptions of the Perso-Islamic Fedallah confirm such polarizing perspectives, an “all-encompassing East” has often been at the rhetorical centre of critical endeavors that “transform the *dramatis personae* of Melville’s work into an ideological representation of America’s war with ‘terrorism’” (Leroux 425).

Calling to task the “prototypical national narrative” that regarded Ahab’s despotic rule and Fedallah’s Mephistophelian complicity as “the totalitarian Other” against which to celebrate “Ishmael’s Americanness” (Pease “AS” 137), “Call Me Fedallah” offers a bracing account of the *Pequod*’s journey from the vantage point of the Parsee. Following C. L. R. James’s lead to address Melville’s authorial insecurity and empower Ahab’s subjects out of submission, and building on Donald Pease’s theoretical lead to anticipate their “proleptic” stories (“DJ” 17), I maintain that Fedallah is a minor character whose full actualization is delimited not only by Ahab’s aggressive expansion but more so by Ishmael’s narrative of survival. Whereas Fedallah has been disembodied in the long aftermath of the self-serving narrative voice “Call me Ishmael,” and marginalized through decades of scholarly silence, we can discern his textual presence through an analysis that retraces the few steps he takes and listens to the few words he articulates. By way of an emancipating account of his role in the chapter “Leg and Arm,” followed

by an equally subversive reading of “The Whale Watch,” a chapter that contains the only fully externalized case of the character engaging in a verbal exchange, I argue that Fedallah is not so much a baffling devil incarnate as a lone drifter with an untold story, summed up in his life-affirming cry to Ahab, “Take another pledge, old man” (*MD* 555).

By suggesting that Fedallah’s radical articulation of his “proleptic narrative” expands the limits of American literature, the transnational aspects of the text would also come to the fore. Unfortunately, though, Franco Moretti’s significant appraisal of Melville’s status within the “world literary system” cannot but replicate the strategic denial of Fedallah’s voice in order to sustain the dichotomy of Ahab’s totalitarian and Ishmael’s liberal dispositions, and establish the novel as a “world text” that symbolizes “the universal dominion of the West” (*ME* 33–4). In confining Fedallah to a parenthetical state of irregularity, noting in light of Goethe’s *Faust*, “(Melville’s Mephistopheles, Fedallah, is an insignificant figure)” (33), Moretti fails to grasp the capacity of “proleptic narratives” to interrupt the comfort zone of such colonial divisions as cores and peripheries, and dismantle the fabric of a World Literature he rightly describes as “one” but “profoundly unequal” (“Conjectures” 161). Indeed, by acknowledging Fedallah’s voice at the new epicentre of a text unbound from world literary curations, it is possible to reveal the character’s significance not only across Moretti’s parentheses but also towards a reading of worldly texts—from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*—that broadens the Parsee’s cosmopolitan vision.

In my close reading of *Moby-Dick*, I first trace the chronological pattern of Fedallah’s emergence and dissolution in the narrative to demonstrate that his physiognomy in general and his voice in particular are strategically denied through an aesthetic apparatus of silence. Simply put, Ishmael’s story of survival beginning afloat Queequeg’s coffin at the expense of Fedallah’s demise, and finally coming full circle to the opening “Call me Ishmael,” is only made possible by keeping Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative”

at bay. Nonetheless, thanks to Melville's creative conflict, Fedallah's silence is also indicative of an untold story yet to materialize, which renders the character a Shirazi Saadi without his *Gulistan* or Venetian Marco Polo without his *Travels*. Such is a twofold capacity that firstly entails a cosmopolitanism manifest in the physical attributes of the character: his Perso-Arabic name, Indo-Chinese attire, and geographic mobility from West Asia to North America and back to East Asia. Secondly, and more importantly, Fedallah subverts the strictures of his silence in an unparalleled moment of voluble autonomy, away from Ishmael's narrative gaze, as he attempts to dissuade Ahab from pursuing the White Whale, pleading with the "old man" to "Take another pledge" (MD 555).

In conclusion, before turning to contemporary Iranian fiction in the ensuing chapters, I summon Edward Said's historic reference to Ahab's destructive chase shortly after the attacks on 9/11 as he problematized the much-anticipated retaliation of the Bush administration in the years to come. However, convinced that Said's acknowledgement of Fedallah's life-affirming role could have sharpened the poignancy of his allusion, I choose neither to extend Said's op-ed nor to return to my opening allegory of *Moby-Dick* in August 1953. Instead, foreshadowing the uncharted territories that map out Fedallah's journey towards Javid and Mergan, I recall a literary event at Brooklyn's Melville House in May 2012, where Mahmoud Dowlatabadi took part in a conversation upon the publication of his most recent novel, *The Colonel*, in North America. Closing his talk by paying homage to *Moby-Dick* as a source of inspiration, Dowlatabadi's presence in Melville's hometown is to my mind an act of border-crossing, not unlike Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," that rises above national and postcolonial borders that separate one literary world from another, and give one hegemonic legitimacy while banishing the other to the neo-imperial edges of World Literature.

In the third chapter, "Call Him Javid: Limning Iranian Manhood in *The Story of Javid*," my concern is how an ambivalent idea of Iran is registered

a pre-Islamic emblem of innocence and grandeur. Interestingly, Fedallah and Javid are literary representations that are creatively invested in ancient Iran, thematically informed by European Orientalism, but originated in different literary traditions. As key elements in European thought, the ancient figure of Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism in general, uprooted from their West Asian origins, recovered from a mere “cult of fire” in the Middle Ages to the rectifying status of promoting “secularism” during the Enlightenment (Stausberg, Ansari 15). In its nineteenth-century appropriations, Zoroastrianism, by then part of the broader body of knowledge on ancient Iran, was further mythologized in literary and philosophical discourses, and merged with the fledgling Indo-European philology that would ultimately shape the destructive “Aryan myth” of the first half of the twentieth-century (Zia-Ebrahimi “Self-Orientalization” 449). In travelling to two cultural spheres, then, Orientalist conceptions of ancient Iran informed two cultural imaginaries outside Europe. Further west in North America, it took part in the Unitarian quest of American Transcendentalists for “a new Reformation” and, more specifically, shaped the reactionary Gnosticism of Melville and his pessimistic portrayal of Asian characters (Versluis 10, 124). Back east in West Asia, it transmuted into the fascination of Iranian nationalists with the pre-Islamic history of their homeland, provoking an archaic but Eurocentric sense of Persian supremacy (Zia-Ebrahimi “Emissary of Golden Age” 387) leading, in Fassih’s case, to the mythopoeic construction of what I term an “original Iranian manhood.”

In *The Story of Javid*, as in *Missing Soluch*, the protagonist’s identity is negotiated across a metaphoric expanse of Iranian *land*. As opposed to *Moby-Dick* in which the ideology of “Manifest Destiny,” foreordaining US expansion across North America, inform Ahab and Ishmael’s penchant to explore the “terraqueous globe” (Mountjoy 10, *MD* 91), Fassih and Dowlatbadi embed their protagonists in the soil of their imagined *vatan* of Iran. As I shall note through Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet’s study of early nationalism in Iran as an allegorically staged “frontier drama” (102), Fassih and Dowlatbadi aestheticize an inward attachment to the territorial and

linguistic space of their literary homelands. Fassih, who has chosen a Zoroastrian character to reminisce over the ancient ruins of Persian empire, ironically imagines his protagonist within the historical frame of late-Qajar Tehran (1785–1925), a period of historical defeat when the very word “Qajariya” came to signify the “treachery” of domestic rulers and their “country-selling” to colonial powers (168).

The early twentieth-century nationalist discourse reviled, on the one hand, the Qajar hegemony on account of a frustrated “manifest destiny” (Kashani-Sabet 41), and lauded, on the other, a discourse of masculinity that assumed moral responsibility to protect the feminized “geobody” of Iran (de Groot 144, Najmabadi 98). Given that Fassih has revisited this period from the 1980s, a romantic notion of “gender archetype” (Connell’s term) is integral to his expression of nationalism through literature. Towards a critique of gender relations, then, I argue that a mythopoeic ideal of masculinity shapes a quest narrative set during the transitional decade of 1920s, when the politically bankrupt Qajars were giving way to the iron fists of the Pahlavi state apparatus. Of course, even though Javid has effectively symbolized the Manichean triumph of good against evil during this period of historical undoing, his performance of masculinity culminates in a misogynistic resolution to the plot that immobilizes significant female characters.

It goes without saying that if *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* portray their protagonists dwelling the “public space” of *vatan* within the “chaotic” phase of Persian *Adab* (Dabashi PLH 264), it is not to suggest that I shall also corroborate Fredric Jameson’s potential reading of these texts as “national allegories.” According to Jameson’s “sweeping hypothesis,” which aims to once and for all fossilize non-Euro-American literatures in the museum of World Literature, the entirety of the so-called “third-world texts” are inherently “allegorical” and categorically “national allegories” (69). Even though critics concur that Jameson’s approach to hide and conceal the rich variety of the world’s literatures under a single monolith is positively

reductionist and epistemologically impossible (Ahmad 4–5), the simplifying tendency to view all postcolonial literatures as merely national products is still prevalent amongst world literary proponents. Regarding the specific case of *The Story of Javid*, I will keep an ocean of distance between the “public space” of Fassih’s Tehran and “the embattled situation” of Jameson’s “third-world culture” – for the latter is an empty signifier with no referent outside the fantasies of a Cold Warrior, whereas the former is a literary act that evokes both the tumultuous early decades of the twentieth-century in Iran and a discourse of nationalism through Javid’s performance of masculinity. In a Melvillean doubloon, then, my interpretation of Javid as a national trope diverts from Jameson’s hypothesis just as my revival of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” rejects Ishmael’s demoralizing assertion that the Parsee is a “muffled mystery to the last” (MD 270).

In my close reading of *The Story of Javid*, I begin with the fictional Preface to the novel, a “disavowing authorial preface” in Gérard Genette’s words (282), in which Fassih declares he has personally met the protagonist to reflect the “heartbreaks” of this “Iranian kid” (SJ vii). As a framing device, the Preface denies full authorial engagement, and in turn emphasizes the act of giving moral voice to an otherwise oppressed individual, suggesting that Javid would have been lost in the wasteland of Qajar Tehran were it not for Fassih’s articulation of a narrative of Iranianness. Considering Javid as Fedallah’s Zoroastrian kin, I also submit that Fassih (whose first name Esmail is Arabic and Persian for Ishmael) assumes responsibility to retrieve Javid out of anonymity. Unlike Ishmael, though, the self-fictionalized Fassih of the Preface positions the protagonist on the centre-stage, going straight to the opening line of the novel *not* to “Call me Esmail” but, practically, to “Call him Javid.”

Accompanying the character in his journey from his ancestral hometown to the nation’s capital, I demonstrate that the harmonious life of Javid in the Zoroastrian Yazd establishes a moral high ground to be contradicted upon his arrival in Qajar Tehran. At the outset, Javid’s *Sidrih*

*Pushan* or male initiation rite constitutes a geographically rooted ideal of Iranianness tied to his enactment of gender. But further on, the Iranian capital under Ahmad Shah's rule (r. 1909–1925), the last Qajar monarch whose reign is represented in the microcosmic household of Javid's nemesis, Prince Malik-Ara, proves undeserving of true men like Javid. The archetypal vision of Javid's masculinity will therefore be violently subdued under Malik-Ara's castrating authority. Nevertheless, the narrative rise of Riza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), leading eventually to the downfall of Qajar dynasty, facilitates Javid's triumph over the Ahriman in Malik-Ara. As Javid's innocent naivety turns in the course of his journey to a combative form of tortured defiance, I finally argue that the final twist in the character's enactment of "original Iranian manhood" emulates a prototype of Riza Shah's hypermasculinity to close the narrative on a tone of revenge.

For this reason, and in light of Fedallah's disposition as a defiant outcast, I conclude before reaching Dowlatabadi's *Zaminej* that finding a mere Zoroastrian kin is pathbreaking but far from sufficient. Through Javid, Fassih has proclaimed *An Eternal Story* (the verbatim translation of the novel's title *Dastan-i Javid*) as an ambitious contribution to the national Canon of Persian literature. But that alone cannot rejuvenate the full extent of Fedallah's cosmopolitan vision not least because Fassih's gendered discourse of nationalism ultimately registers thorny sites of inequality vis-à-vis portrayal of femininities in the patriotic world of the narrative.

In the fourth chapter "Call Her Mergan: Breaking the Silence of *Missing Soluch*," I finally arrive—from the *seaward* expansionism of *Moby-Dick* and the *landed* nationalism of *The Story of Javid*—at "God's Land" in *Zaminej*, a site of defiance where Dowlatabadi's Mergan struggles against the locally patriarchal, nationally tyrannical, and globally neocolonial forces that shape her character in a rural context. Considering John de Crevecoeur's understanding of whaling as a distinctly American form of farming in the eighteenth-century (99), *Moby-Dick* and *Missing Soluch* both emerge as regional statements that destabilize burgeoning metropolitan centres in

antebellum New York and contemporary Tehran respectively. However, digging to the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny enmeshed in both de Crevecoeur and Melville's works, I perceive Dowlatabadi's *landed* imagination as a less enterprising and more radical faculty. For Mergan's protection of "God's Land" is not an act of colonization but an expression of dissent as she attempts, against the grain of a narrative force glossing over Fedallah's, to define her character within the land she unyieldingly occupies. As I join Fedallah on a journey to Zaminej, it will be through secular projections of territorial land rather than sacred projects of expansion that Mergan reflects Fedallah's image as a defiant castaway.

To grasp the potential underlying a comparative reading of *Moby-Dick* and *Missing Soluch*, I will illustrate on a literary map the "'emerging' qualities," following Franco Moretti's pathbreaking cartography of literary worlds, that two intersecting narratives disclose by incorporating "the real and the imaginary" (GMP 53). Laying out a map of the *Pequod's* journey on the watermark of the Cold War-torn *Moby-Dick*, and highlighting Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" as an alternative to Ishmael's wayward plunge into the sea, Mergan's struggles on "God's Land" come along as acts of nonviolent resistance as she defies local politics of patriarchy, national policies of land reform and, by long extension, neocolonial maneuvers of the JKF administration in Iran during the Cold War (see Figure 2 in chapter 4). I will thereby suggest that Mergan is a representation of femininity unique to the corpus of Iranian fiction by men, as well as a significant contribution to the body of feminist literature by women. The resilience of this character to oppose interlocking sites of physical and structural violence reflects Fedallah's own resolve to speak up despite the punishing depths of Ishmael's survival story. Of course, whereas the echoes of Fedallah's denied voice, delineated in the second chapter, remain limited to an intervention into the American Canon, the account of Mergan's struggles has been textually inscribed throughout *Missing Soluch*. In synthesizing the worlds of Mergan and Fedallah, therefore, I argue that in-between Dowlatabadi's *land* and Melville's *sea* is a third dimension in which Mergan emerges as a



resourceful woman, creative artisan, uncompromising laborer, and irrepressible protagonist to articulate Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" in the world of Persian *Adab*.

To conceptualize this inter-textual dynamic in light of my world literary issues, I return to Hamid Dabashi's critique of postcolonialism, which in the first chapter informed a "literary proposition" to alter the Euro-American "interlocutor" of Comparative Literature (PO 272). Embracing "a new organicity," I have suggested that by virtue of her birth in the autonomous realm of Iranian fiction, without assuming a position East or West of *Moby-Dick*, Mergan rejuvenates Fedallah's voice. Extending his debate with Edward Said's resolve to attain a democratic critique of "humanism," and Gayatri Spivak's postmodernist challenge to theoretical acts of representation, Dabashi arrives at the empowering figure of a "defiant subject" (PO 169)—whom I propose to read through the fiction of Dowlatabadi and retrace in the character of Mergan. Running between Said's project of rescuing European humanism and Spivak's efforts to deconstruct it before hearing the subaltern speak is "a defiant subject" who is "*theoretically under-theorized*" but "*politically personified*" (ibid).

While Dabashi concurs that the "defiant subject" is conceptually born only "in the course of revolutionary praxis," he contends that s/he must not be "an agent of the colonial extension of an essentializing, totalizing, and sovereign subject" (PO 172). This is a position best materialized not in revolutionary grand narratives such as Islamism, nationalism, or socialism but in the realm of art and aesthetics (172–75). For instance, the career of the Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf constitutes "the creative crafting of a defiant subject" as he has matured, since the 1970s, from an Islamist revolutionary (corroborating the Islam and the West divide) to an internationally praised filmmaker (dwelling the world beyond colonial cartographies, 172).

Approaching Mahmoud Dowlatabadi as an Iranian novelist who is fully exposed to the power dynamics of the "world literary system," I

suggest that he is a widely translated author who is received as a peripheral object of curiosity from post-revolutionary “Iran” (Sahley). Yet it is my assertion that the creative birth of Mergan in Dowlatabadi’s fiction bears a peculiar resemblance to Makhmalbaf’s “radical reconsideration” of the postcolonial condition (*PO* 172). Having heard of a laborer named Mergan in his childhood days in the village of Dowlatabad, before revisiting her in his mind when a political prisoner during the Pahlavi era, Dowlatabadi wrote *Missing Soluch* later in 1979 at a juncture in Iranian history when “the sound of gunfire was echoing around the city” at the dawn of the Islamic Revolution (Rastegar “Interview” 443). Rather than partaking in the revolution, say, legitimizing a nationalist discourse as Fassih has in *The Story of Javid*, Dowlatabadi has chosen the pen over the sword, foregrounding a rural laborer and marginalized woman as his protagonist. As such, Mergan is a representation of femininity categorically ignored by urban middle and upper-class discourses of feminism (Tabari 21, Motlagh 59–64), which constitutes the most explosive manifestation of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative.”

In my close reading of *Missing Soluch*, at last, I maintain following Caren Lambert that Dowlatabadi’s is a dynamic perspective on regional identities—befitting of Mergan’s establishment as a “defiant subject”—that is neither limited to a romantic picture of rural Khurasan nor confined to a naturalized sense of Iranianness. The critical approach of the narrative towards gender and regional identities, namely femininities in a rural context, has resulted in the focalization of two minor characters Raghiyeh and Hajer as well as the protagonist Mergan. The ordeals that the trio will go through, together with their struggles to survive, are manifest in a series of graphically disturbing but politically candid expositions of misogyny that unsettle the audience. Of the three women, of course, it is Mergan who stands out as the one to redeem Dowlatabadi’s literary world from its veneer of naturalism. Turning to the poetics of her defiant disposition, I argue that Mergan’s character development entails a number of watersheds that reach a climax with her expression of passive resistance within the public space of

"God's Land." As the masculinist elite of Zaminej denies Mergan's rights to cultivate her land in the aftermath of the land reform program, they find it increasingly difficult to silence her protestations. However interrupted by the locally and globally imposed forms of economic inequality, gender and class chauvinism, Mergan radicalizes her romantic attachments to "God's Land" by occupying it as a means to recast her-defiant-self. No longer rooted in a struggle for land, she finally embarks on a journey into an open-ended space that expands the interpretive boundaries of the narrative.

Having dared to imagine a plurality of literary worlds from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*, I suggest that Mergan's "poetics of defiance" stands in contrast to Fedallah's "aesthetics of silence," and her "actualized narrative" gives substance to his "proleptic narrative." As a "defiant subject," Mergan has effectively surpassed varied sites of violence both intrinsic and external to the narrative—including the misogyny of the Zaminej folk, the narrator's occasional attempts to essentialize her femininity as a custodian of "God's Land" and, last but not least, a host of world literary reviews that perpetuate Mergan's subalternity between an Islamic "East" (Lytal) and a progressive "West" (Nafisi).

In conclusion, the idea of retrieving (in the second chapter), relocating (in the third), and binding a "proleptic narrative" (in the fourth) shall not be limited to a selection of American and Iranian novels only. If, as should my thesis demonstrate, Fedallah's tall tale is an allegorical bridge to transcend the centre and circumference of a bogus "world" declared a "republic of letters," then an unlimited range of aesthetic properties can help to envision a far more constructive and much less curatorial approach to literary traditions around the world. Turning, as a case in point, to Amir Naderi's film *The Runner*, I will suggest that the director's acknowledged fascination with *Moby-Dick* partly accounts for the protagonist's penchant to take to the ship. In the fifth chapter "Amiru's Pledge: A Melvillean Vision from Iran to America" I demonstrate that Amiru's fantasies of escape from home, which entail intertwined sequences at the waterfront, the airport, and ultimately

the elementary school, lead to a journey of self-discovery that culminates in an emancipating learning of the Persian alphabet. Amiru's development as an individual and social being from a solitary soul to a concerned companion, also puts Naderi in a debate with Melville over the nature of Ahab's voyage. The outcome projects Amiru's "pledge" to survive in a spirit of commonweal as the visual manifestation of Fedallah's efforts to rescue the *Pequod*. Thus remapping the world by revisiting the Parsee's "proleptic narrative," Amiru points at the silver screen as a realm of new possibilities where the transnational body of Iranian cinema, in dialogue with the world at large, is able to unshackle readers and critics from the confines of imperial cores and dehistoricized peripheries.

## Chapter 2

### Call Me Fedallah: Reading a Proleptic Narrative in *Moby-Dick*

In blood, under the stars and through the wind, day and night  
I have pursued my lost poem.  
On each and every clod of earth in this labyrinth,  
I have limned a trace of my lost poem.

Ahmad Shamlu, "Lost Poem"

#### Whaling Voyage by One Parsee

The capacity for *Moby-Dick* to be read as a polysemous allegory is evident as early as the first chapter, "Loomings," where Ishmael prepares his reader for the voyage ahead by stressing the importance of "the invisible police officer of the Fates" as the *raison d'être* of his narrative (MD 29). The Fates, we are meant to believe, have ordained both Ishmael's initial urge to "quietly take to the ship" (25), as well as his eventual survival as he "escaped alone to tell" us (638). Yet the adventure, however foreordained since time immemorial, is only a "brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances" of Providence:

*"Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States.*  
"WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL.  
"BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGHANISTAN." (29)

Ishmael's "VOYAGE" – or narrative, by extension – appears in uppercase, at the centre of the page, and engulfed between two historical events: a US presidential election, and (most likely) the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839–1842. In the very chapter that most famously opens with "Call me Ishmael" (MD 25), the narrator underscores his quest in the historically situated setting of world politics, perpetuating his narrative as the statement of an all-knowing subject with authority over the reader's perception of the world in *Moby-Dick*. There is, however, another way to reimagine Ishmael's "bill" of Providence from the vantage point of Fedallah, Ahab's Parsee companion. For readers in present-day Iran, where the historical roots of Fedallah

converge, the enjoyment of Ishmael's words may be overshadowed by the "Grand Contested Election" of Barack Obama whose crippling economic sanctions against a (might-be) nuclear Iran have always been a subject of debate (Sanger), or a "BLOODY BATTLE" on Terror that continues to affect the region's neighbours, at the time of this writing through drones, in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Nordland). Ishmael's voyage resonates with intimations for modern-day readers, and Melville's recourse to history still makes sense in what Bakhtin terms "the present in all its open-endedness" (108).

Before dealing with the past, present, and future consequences of my study, through which, by all means, Fedallah will talk back to a chain of world historical conflicts from the nineteenth-century wars for *spermaceti* to twentieth-century wars for *oil*, I must note that *Moby-Dick* as recognized today was born not merely in 1851 but, more significantly, in the postwar decade of 1920s. During a period now recognized as "Melville Revival," the author's received image in US academy was reconstructed, according to Paul Lauter, "as part of an ideological conflict which linked advocates of modernism and traditional high culture values against a social and cultural 'other'" that was primarily seen as "feminine, genteel, exotic, dark, foreign, and numerous." As a result, the "Melville Revival" critics drew on "a distinctively masculine, Anglo-Saxon image" of the author to herald "a lone and powerful artistic beacon against the dangers presented by the [foreign and immigrant] masses" (6).

The ensuing "shift in evaluative emphasis" from a nineteenth-century romance to a contemporary beacon of "'high' culture" has led, in William Spanos's words, to "the apotheosis of *Moby-Dick* not simply as Melville's" but, more urgently, "as an American 'masterpiece'" (16). During the fateful postwar years leading to the Cold War, when the US Canon was in dire need of another Great American Novel, critics found in *Moby-Dick* the promise of "the sovereign individual in its self-present and plenary form" representing "the civilized American consciousness" against the cultural threat not only

of the flooding “immigrant masses,” but also of “the emergent ‘Red Scare’” (20). In fact, two separate camps of literary scholars in the next generation, from the liberal progressive F. O. Matthiessen to the liberal anti-Communist Richard Chase, made proper use of the newly founded canonicity of *Moby-Dick* as they negotiated nationhood in mid-century America—just as Melville had a century before.

In what is now an academic cliché amongst Melville scholars, *Moby-Dick* evolved into a Cold War text in a climate where the political DNA of American Studies was predicated on the “ideological construct that developed out of the consensus politics of liberal anti-communism of the postwar era” (Pease “NA” 4). Initially the Americanist agenda valorised the United States as “a realm of pure possibility” where “a whole self” was capable to “internalize the major contradictions at work in American history” in order to attain a state of exceptionalism “in a language and in a set of actions and relations confirmative of the difference between a particular cultural location and the rest of the world” (12). Secondly, and as importantly, in the effort to contain intellectual opposition, Americanists were also driven to keep realms of culture and politics apart and often opposed. Most famously, the Columbia scholar Lionel Trilling pleaded with the American literati in his *Liberal Imagination* to “contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of the culture,” and in turn “not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency” (9). Reading between the lines, Donald Pease suggests that the exercise of Trilling’s “liberal imagination” would have encouraged the “otherwise politically engaged liberal subject” to produce “an *imaginary separation* between the cultural and the public sphere,” so as to avoid the problematic issues of race, gender, class, or imperialism. Yet above all,

[I]n diverting their attention from the “limited” world of politics (preoccupied by the larger and permanent dialectical contradiction that sets, for Trilling, the United States’ freedom against the Soviets’ totalitarianism) to the densely nuanced, complexly differentiated realm of high modernist culture, American readers/writers

experience a surrogate fulfilment of their deepest drives and ersatz wholeness for their authentic selves. ("NA" 8)

The mid-twentieth-century interpretations of *Moby-Dick* began with Matthiessen's celebration of Ishmael as a liberal agent at the centre of an *American Renaissance* master-text, and culminated in Chase's critique of Ahab as a Stalinist anti-hero behind the "machinery of dictatorship" that is the *Pequod* (54). Thus capitalizing on a strict sense of disparity between Ishmael and Ahab (which, by the way, I will repudiate in the following), decade after decade of Cold War critics read *Moby-Dick* as "a prototypical national narrative" that "posited Ahab's monomania as the signifier of the totalitarian Other in opposition to which Ishmael's Americanness was defined, elaborated on, and defended" (Pease "AS" 137). What is more, driven by their "liberal imagination" to carefully maintain the distance between realms of aesthetics and politics, and hence remain unwary of traumatic ambiguities such as the racism of Pip's alienation and the xenophobia of Fedallah's demonization, such Cold War critics failed to read any further than the dichotomy that kept Ahab and Ishmael apart. Unsurprisingly, the recurrent focus of many such studies was Ishmael whose survival had made him "the victim of Ahab's narrative," "the narrator of his own tale," and, above all, "the subject of such urgent addresses as 'Call me Ishmael'" (Pease "MCW" 145).

Needless to say, *Moby-Dick* is a far more complex literary event than a mere "weapon in the Cold War" deployed to highlight "the responsibility" of an American Ishmael "to colonize life worlds—at home and abroad—as an effort to oppose the Soviet Union's anticipated colonization of them" (Pease "AS" 137). In fact, when revisited from the vantage point of Fedallah, the fine line between the aggressively communist Ahab and the idealistically American Ishmael becomes much blurred, and more open to critical inquiry. In the chapter "Doubloon," for instance, the two major characters offer their intimate thoughts on the significance of a Spanish "gold coin," which Ahab has beforehand nailed to the mainmast of the ship as an incentive for the crew. To begin with, Ahab's description of the artefact's engravings easily



align the character with the “totalitarian Other” of Melville’s Cold War readers:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, — three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (484)

The underlying significance of this monologue is the self-assertion of an egotistical mind reflecting on a world enchanted by Ahab, the formidable centre of the universe. With the doubloon on the mast, Ahab does not need to bother when he locks himself up in the captain’s quarters plotting revenge, since the authority required to steer the vessel chasing its game exerts itself through the gold doubloon, the perfect vantage point of the *Pequod*’s “panoptic mechanism” that, in Foucault’s words, supervises, homogenizes, and normalizes the vessel’s “political anatomy” (208). Interestingly enough, Ishmael’s observations on the coin, which precedes Ahab’s, are no less totalitarian in essence and expansionist in disposition particularly when read in light of the hierarchy of minor characters from Pip to Fedallah who follow suit to pay homage to the doubloon throughout the rest of the chapter (MD 485–88).

Capturing the contours of Ahab’s Spanish doubloon, Ishmael declares that “On its round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO” (MD 484). A trivial detail at face value, Ishmael’s semiotic analysis of the doubloon begs to differ since in his estimate “this bright coin came from a country planted in the *middle of the world*, and *beneath* the great equator, and named after it ” (ibid, emphases added). A simple lesson in geography giving way to an astounding statement on American Continentalism and Manifest Destiny, Ishmael’s description of the doubloon turns into a statement of his own imperial ambitions with the equatorial line crossing the Americas’ stature, and with Ecuador and Quito sparkling at the crossroads of his cartographic imagination (Figure 1). What is Greenwich,

Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, Persepolis—or, for that matter, any other colonial metropole since the dawn of time—to Ishmael when his imaginative geography flags the Americas as the world’s new epicentre? Such self-serving projection of America’s worldly ambitions on an artefact nailed to a mainmast that carries the American flag could not be more thrilling, particularly since Ahab, the ruler of the *Pequod*, is bound to deliver a similar—albeit more violent—speech in the following paragraph.

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 1. “America—the Real Center of the World” as imagined by Ishmael; Library of Congress

Yet from Fedallah’s vantage point, I should imagine, there is not that much to tell between Ahab’s totalitarianism and Ishmael’s democratic ethos, at least when it comes to rhetorics of world domination. This should conjure up the anecdote with which I opened my thesis. In July 1953, just when the liberal anti-communist consensus was busy at work solidifying the “scenario” in *Moby-Dick* “that privileged Ishmaelite America as the symbolic agent of the ‘free world’ in its self-ordained efforts to resist Ahabian communist aggression” (Spanos 33), the ambitious CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt Jr. went out of his way to cross the western borders of Iran to sow what some historians believe to be the first seeds of extremism and terror in the region (Kinzer). With direct orders from then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the pillar of the American Empire during the Cold War (Immerman 169), Roosevelt was scheduled to arrive in Tehran, work out alliances, and conspire against the democratically elected government of Muhammad Musaddiq so as to, ideally, perform the “vital dirty work of freedom” and thwart the threat of communism from Iran’s northern neighbour, the Soviet Union (Kinzer 4). As one reads Roosevelt’s diaries, *Counter Coup*, it is hard to pass without noticing the air of manly bravado and masculine self-confidence that only foster his personal determination and political dogma. After all, one would be curious to know how the grandson of “the frontier’s main booster,” Theodore Roosevelt (Kimmel

"Frontier" 326), would have behaved in the new frontier of Iran. As Kermit drove towards the "Iranian frontier" to undergo Operation AJAX, his diary reads:

I remember what my father wrote of his arrival in Africa with his father, T.R., in 1909 on the African Game Trail trip. "It was a great adventure, and all the world was young!" I felt as he must have felt then. My nerves tingled, my spirits soared as we moved up the mountain road. (138)

Here the egomaniacal violence of Ahab bleeds into the calculative sobriety of Ishmael in "The Doubloon" to, in the words of the latter, "interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole" (*MD* 547). When a month later in August 1953, the Ishmaelite hero of Americanists did finally manage to depose the Iranian PM, "a story took hold that Roosevelt had ridden triumphantly atop the lead tank as it crashed through the streets of Tehran toward Mossadegh's house" (Kinzer 183). What is interesting with regard to my reading of *Moby-Dick* against the backdrop of Operation AJAX is that had Trilling not encouraged "an *imaginary separation*" between aesthetics and politics, and had his "liberal imagination" not neutralized the capacity for a more politically engaged reading of Fedallah (Pease "NA" 8), then a potential parallel between Ishmael and Kermit Roosevelt would have easily materialized. In fact, it was not until the 1960s, following the heat of the conflict in Vietnam, that the "cold war consensus lost its power to contain opposition," resulting in students revisiting "Ahab and Ishmael" to finally articulate a long overdue "refusal to acknowledge the difference between the cultural and the public realm" (26).

Nevertheless, roughly at the same time when Dulles and Roosevelt had plans for the Musaddiq government in the State Department in 1953, the Trinidadian cultural critic C. L. R. James offered a subversive interpretation of *Moby-Dick* which changes the course of this chapter. Detained on New York's Ellis Island for six months while being probed during the height of McCarthyism in the United States, James decided to ignore Trilling's advice and rechannel his frustration with the American socio-political scene into

*Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, a reading of *Moby-Dick* from the standpoint of its victims. Alienated and on the verge of deportation, James's identification with Melville's *isolatoes* proved uncanny, particularly due to the canonical status of the novel as a national allegory. As Pease has argued in numerous articles on James's work on Melville, just when the US state security "transformed" such sites as Ellis Island "into a scene of social death" for émigré literati like James, Melville's Americanist critics were just as busy excluding the *Pequod's* multi-ethnic crew—"out of the frame narrative for which Ishmael's liberal values had served as the principle of integration"—for being allegedly submissive to Ahab's totalitarian will (Pease "NS" 35). In other words, the predominating "frame narrative" of Melville's mid-century critics "presupposed the non-survivability of the crew." Obviously enough, James could not remain deferential to such "interpretive consensus" (ibid).

In his effort to at once resist American Studies *and* defy his detention, James saw in Melville's work familiar faces—"written off the official cartographies"—that could help to dismantle varied sites of inequalities ranging from Melville's literary universe in the nineteenth- well to "the seamless narrative of US global power" in the twentieth-century (Pease "NS" 36, 40). In short, James set out on a quest to trace the "untold tales" that were partially promised in *Moby-Dick*, but were utterly silenced in the "frame narrative" of Cold War critics (41). In a passage from "Knights and Squires," which deserves full quotation due to Pease's pathbreaking exegesis, James argued that Melville had originally intended "to make the crew the real heroes of his book," but was unfortunately "afraid of criticism."

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, tough dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall tough that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, though just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! (MD 146, James 17)

In his reading of the above – which addresses not its textual manifestation in *Moby-Dick* but its appropriation in James's work – Pease argues that although the passage seems to have been articulated by Ishmael, it is more likely Melville's statement of authorial intent as "it inscribes the site from within which Melville was in the process of writing *Moby Dick*" ("DJ" 13). Therefore, "the narrating 'I'" of the passage, diverging from that of "Call me Ishmael," lingers in the process of considering whether to grant the "castaways" with the power of speech. "While its representation may lie within the written text," Pease suggests, "the scene whereon Melville wrote the novel must perforce remain outside of the completed narrative as the locus for the narrative Melville *wanted* to narrate but *did not*" (ibid, emphases added). Thus, claiming that Melville excluded the "castaways" from the centre-stage because he was "afraid of criticism," James foregrounds his own critical stance against his contemporary Americanists. In other words, James goes a long way to proclaim his position not merely as a Melville critic, but more so as "a narrator-mariner who relays the narration Melville was afraid to write to his fellow mariners on Ellis Island" (16). To expand the horizons then visible to James on Ellis Island, I further add that Pease's critique could have also addressed the Persian Fedallah and his fellow mariners as the more distant victims of the Cold War's emergency state in Tehran during August 1953.

C. L. R. James, Pease dazzlingly argues, "wrests interpretive authority away from Ishmael" to recast "a narration" of his own "that has not yet been narrated and that Ishmael will not narrate" ("NS" 37). In what is of tremendous impact on my reading of Fedallah not just here but throughout the comparative study in this thesis, Pease argues that James's heroic un-reading and re-reading of *Moby-Dick* against the "frame narrative" of the Cold War is, in effect, "the *proleptic* actualization of the intention to heroicize the mariners whom Ishmael did not," but nevertheless left intact "as a nonsynchronous narrative resource" ("DJ" 17, emphasis added). Embracing James's commitment to reimagine unheard voices, and following Pease's lead to anticipate them, I will in the coming pages elicit and rewrite

Fedallah's unique perspective, termed a "proleptic narrative" at a new epicentre of *Moby-Dick*, to counter the current of Ishmael's narrative of survival. Integral to my quest—provoked, not unlike James's, by global inequalities—is the notion that Fedallah is capable of subverting dominant stereotypes about his image as Ahab's wicked seducer. Accordingly, whereas Fedallah is dehumanized in the long aftermath of the self-perpetuating "Call me Ishmael," and marginalized through decades of scholarly silence, there are hitherto-ignored moments in *Moby-Dick* that give substance to Fedallah's agency to speak not as the crew's Azrael, but as a voice of sanity calling on Ahab to change course. Such capacity of the otherwise minor character to subvert the strictures of his silence will most fully materialize in the chapter "The Whale Watch," where Fedallah pleads with Ahab to "Take another pledge," and potentially survive the wrath of Moby Dick (MD 555).

"The extraterritorial literary imagination C. L. R. James practiced on Ellis Island," Pease rightly points out, is appealing to today's "deterritorialized readers of Melville" such as myself who seek beyond Kermit Roosevelt's brief sojourn in Tehran an echo of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." Of course, whereas James has much nobly "multiplied the temporalities in which *Moby-Dick* can be interpreted" ("NS" 42-43), his restorative reading has not done justice to Fedallah himself. Statements such as "Totalitarianism and barbarism are inseparable, twin sides of the same coin, and Melville makes Ahab and Fedallah inseparable" are the best James can offer on the Parsee, the *ne plus ultra* of the *Pequod's* castaways (55). Further on, in another utterly fallacious and categorically flawed observation typical of twentieth-century readers of *Moby-Dick*, James insists, "Fedallah, who as a primitive aboriginal [sic] worships fire for fire's sake [sic], is completely defeated [sic]" (ibid). Such are, much problematically, dominant perceptions of Fedallah's image as a stereotype of deception that ought to be addressed before proceeding with the comparative reading of the character's journey from American to Persian literatures.

### The Subordinate Phantom

Mukhtar Ali Isani traces the origins of Melville's knowledge of Zoroastrianism in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by the English historian Edward Gibbon (386). Through Pier Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, in addition, Melville learned of the cosmic struggle, in Zoroastrian doctrine, between Ahura Mazda the "All-Good" and Ahriman the "All-Evil," well reflected throughout *Moby-Dick* (387). More pertinent to the Parsee Fedallah, moreover, it was Thomas Moore's Oriental romance *Lalla Rookh* and the anonymous tale "Fadlallah and Zemroude" published in *The Spectator* that brought home to Melville the idea of the Zoroastrian character. In the former tale, "the religious orthodoxy of Zoroastrians" attracted Melville's attention to two major characters, "Fadladeen and Abdalla" (Isani "Naming of Fedallah" 382). In the latter, "Fadlallah" was "a Prince of great Virtues" aligned with a "villainous Indian dervish" who could "enter the soulless bodies of others" (ibid). Given such line of descent, so conceived in many critical observations on Melville's Fedallah, the Perso-Arabic etymology of the character's name—as *Fazl* (grace) of *Allah* (God)—is widely perceived as ironic to the actual function of the character as Ahab's Mephistopheles (388). To be sure, fatalistic perceptions of Fedallah abound amongst Melville's readers, confirmed by studies that ascertain the author's application of Asian characters in general, and Persian figures in particular, to "reinforce his pessimistic worldview" (Versluis 124, Marr 230).

Technically, Fedallah is a "minor character" whose perceived role in Ishmael's narrative is delimited to a much-demonized stereotype of deception and cunning passivity. For Alex Woloch, a "minor character" is a subordinate figure whose existence within the broader frame of the narrative is determined by "a battle on the discursive plane" between marginal characters and a protagonist who, by and large, determines "the limited space that remains" for others to negotiate their boundaries (2-3). Considering Ishmael and Fedallah who constitute the core (as narrator) and periphery (as ultimate outcast) of *Moby-Dick*, a matrix of distribution situates

each “*character-space*” —or site of encounter between the individual and the larger space of Melville’s fictional world—within the novel’s “*character-system*” —or collective multiplicity of “differentiated character-spaces” forming the society of *Pequod* (14).

The chief dynamic undergirding the terms of “minorness” is, to Woloch’s mind, the tension between the subordinate figure’s “implied being” on the one hand, “and the manifestation of this being in the fictional universe” on the other (25). For instance, the implied reality of Fedallah, as a Parsee harpooner having joined Ahab from West Asia in a quest for the White Whale, is simply juxtaposed against, and then glossed over by, the self-aggrandizing narrative of Ishmael whose voice as sole survivor will constitute what Woloch terms “the distribution of attention” throughout the narrative (15). In other words, the “character-system” of the novel, which aims categorically to strip Fedallah of any form of human agency, comprises not just “*interacting* individuals” like Stubb and Flask shooting the breeze but also of “*intersecting* character-spaces” like Ishmael’s floating on Queequeg’s coffin (17). There is, following Woloch’s argument, a “social dimension” in the narrative proper that reveals “the space of a particular character” with regard to “the other characters that either crowd him out or revolve around him (18).

Such tension in the “discursive universe” of *Moby-Dick* between Ishmael and Fedallah maps a literary universe with the former placed at “a referential core” marginalizing the latter as an “allegory” that must in turn re-secure Ishmael’s autonomy “at the center of the text’s symbolic structure” (Woloch 18). On a textual level, therefore, Fedallah is strategically reduced — in a process that I will term “aesthetics of silence” — into an inaudible figure embedded in a distrustful atmosphere where Ishmael and the rest of the American whalers need desperately to come to terms with Ahab’s monomania. Fedallah is thus identified under the piercing gaze of his shipmates with either a “muffled mystery to the last” (Ishmael, *MD* 270) or the “evil shadow” of Ahab extending towards the *Pequod’s* destruction



(Starbuck, 624). As Woloch suggests, such “allegorical (or functional)” dramatization of the “minor character,” as is poignantly the case with Fedallah, occurs at the expense of “flattening” an otherwise complex individual with a potential narrative of his own (20).

Interestingly enough, the tendency to strip the “minor character” of his interiority in order to open up enough “character-space” for the “singular, central consciousness” of Ishmael is just as internalized in Melville scholarship as it is in the narrative itself. To reveal another aspect of the body of Melville criticism earlier exposed, many readers have over the years followed suit with Ishmael’s narrative voice to present Fedallah as lacking a “consciousness or point of view” (Walcutt 310), as a “diabolic” Persian set against a “Yankee Faust” (Matthiessen 442), hence a trivial “Mephistopheles” (Moretti 33), and the apotheosis of “the types of the cunning Asian” (Marr 230) serving as a proxy for Ahab’s despotism and ultimate damnation. William A. Evans, for instance, discusses “the importance of Fedallah” as an Orientalized stereotype which is committed “to conduct Ahab’s soul to hell” (77). As opposed to Pip, Evans suggests, who attempts as a guardian angel to preserve Ahab’s sanity, Fedallah functions as a “barometric device” to specify “the progress of Ahab’s monomania” (ibid). By the same token, in her seminal *Melville’s Orienda*, Dorothee Finkelstein extends Henry A. Murray’s assertion that Melville has coined the word “Fedallah” to signify “dev(il) Allah” in an Islamic context (226). Interpreting the Parsee as a “Fedai” Assassin, a fifth-century AH (twelfth-century AD) Shia revolutionary sect in present-day Iran, Finkelstein takes Fedallah to be a “destroying angel” dispatched to assassinate Ahab both physically and spiritually, breathing “the satanic intoxication of hatred and pride” into the captain’s soul, before pushing him off the deck (238).

Jean Francois Leroux, who also provides a critique of Finkelstein’s Orientalist work (427–31), sums up the attitude of twentieth-century readers of Fedallah as a structure of feeling informed by the Cold War that “transform[s] the *dramatis personae* of Melville’s work into an ideological

representation of America's war with 'terrorism' and 'fascism' by conflating these categories with an ever-shifting and all-encompassing 'East'" (425). An "East-West dichotomy," Leroux opines, has sat at the heart of various studies since the era of "Melville Revival" (426), which has simply perpetuated the marginality of Fedallah within the intricate "character system" of *Moby-Dick*. Fedallah, therefore, is a character mystified and misrepresented within the murky space between appearance and reality. What he is and he appears to be, what he utters and what he is heard to say, what he does and what he is thought to have done, whom he befriends and whom he is believed to betray, are all lost in a distrustful atmosphere where his American peers need desperately to come to terms with Ahab's monomania. What I propose here, with significant repercussions for the following chapters, is a restorative reading of *Moby-Dick* that re-imagines Fedallah as bearing a textual capacity to swim against the tides of Ishmael's narrative as well as the scholarship it has sustained in order to arrive at the Parsee's "proleptic narrative"—a tall tale that Melville wished to tell but Ishmael never obliged.

Significantly enough, the capacity to reconstruct the fictional world of *Moby-Dick* from Fedallah's vantage point lies within the character himself. Woloch, who exposes the gap between the "center" and "circumference" of the narrative space, also writes of the capacity to view the "minor character" from a rather radical angle (21). Woloch suggests that each character has a singular 'case,'" that is, "an orientating consciousness that, like the protagonist's own consciousness, could potentially organize an entire fictional universe" (22). In effect, that which I have termed a "proleptic narrative" following C. L. R. James's penchant for untold stories and Donald Pease's urge to theorize them, is textually manifest in *Moby-Dick*—however left untapped through a century of critical silence. Fedallah, it is my assertion, is a traveller with a "lost poem," to summon Ahmad Shamlu's poem from the epigraph, whose story shall be retrieved and thus historicized from "the shadow-space" between his "narrative position" on the one hand and his "human personality" on the other (40).

In a unique corrective to stereotypical perceptions of Fedallah, Cyrus Patell argues that Melville's engagements with Zoroastrianism, from Ishmael's veneration of sea to Ahab's past excursions to Persia, have planted the seeds of cosmopolitanism in *Moby-Dick* (26, 30). A significant aspect of the novel, Patell argues, is Melville's effort to highlight "the difficulty of achieving a truly cosmopolitan culture" in antebellum America (30). That is to say, whereas Ishmael's status as the embodiment of "New York cosmopolitanism" appears to collide with "Ahab's brand of fundamentalism" due to the former's liberal bond with Queequeg as opposed to the latter's resolve to destroy the *Pequod*, the binary gets more complicated once Fedallah enters the picture. In effect, because "Ishmael and his crewmates associate Fedallah with the devil," and in so doing inspire a chain of interested readers to demonize the character, it is clear that there is a crack in Ishmael's idealism at the core of his narrative (23, 32). In short, the reason why Ishmael is not able to extend his friendship with Queequeg towards Fedallah is the failure of his "cosmopolitanism" (34).

Patell's conclusion is provocative as he attempts to corroborate a gap between Melville's agency as author and Ishmael's autonomy as narrator so as to point out that "the novel itself 'knows' more than its narrator, Ishmael, does" (34). In fact, when it finally comes to dominant perceptions of Fedallah "as an avatar of Mephistopheles," Patell claims that Melville is indeed "dramatizing the difficulty of putting a cosmopolitan perspective into practice" (34-35). In response, I do not intend to reject Patell's idea "that it is not 'Melville' but 'Ishmael' who transforms Fedallah into a 'shadowy figure'" because, after all, my own interpretation rests on the premise that there is convincing textual evidence that give substance to Fedallah's capacity to strike back, mainly, in "The Whale Watch." However, as far as the "intersecting character-spaces" of Ishmael and Fedallah are concerned, the epistemic violence embedded within the dynamics of character representation, ranging from Ishmael's centralized voice to the very forces of nature lashing Fedallah around *Moby Dick*, are too overwhelming to leave issues of authorial intent out of discussion. What I am proposing, instead, as

an extension of Patell's attempts to problematize Ishmael's textual violence, is to invest in Melville's polyfocal world and open-ended syntax, and trace significant—if brief—moments when it is Fedallah, rather than his interlocutors claiming the subaltern's voice, who bears the autonomy to articulate his own story, a "proleptic narrative" manifest, if not yet materialized, in *Moby-Dick*.

The simple beauty of a "minor character," Alex Woloch notes, is that the subordinate figure "is so successful as a narrative type," so effectively writ with only a few words, that s/he "enfolds the untold tale into the telling" (42). Woloch, as Donald Pease and C. L. R. James before him, maintains that every "literary text solicits reinterpretation" with every "minor character" challenging the reader "to construct a story—a distributed pattern of attention—which is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse" (41). Following and extending the above, it is my argument that Fedallah, at a new epicentre of *Moby-Dick*, bears the capacity to transcend his "minorness" and articulate a story that counters Ishmael's self-serving narrative of survival. At the heart of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" is the dissuading cry "Take another pledge, old man," uttered to Ahab late in the voyage (*MD* 555), which simply subverts received critical wisdom about his limits in *Moby-Dick*. As such, my textual intervention is predicated *not* on Ishmael's cartographic imagination with only America at the centre of the world (*MD* 29), but on the story of a "minor character" whose story potentially transcends the canonical confines of a Great American Novel. By the same token, as I will demonstrate in the following, Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" also helps to subvert a parallel but transnational interpretation of *Moby-Dick* in the epoch of World Literature, which, not unlike misreadings of Richard Chase and F.O Matthiessen, distorts a wide-ranging narrative at the expense of the outcast.

### **Bound Round the World!**

From Melville's *Moby-Dick* in North America, to Fassih's *The Story of Javid* and Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* in West Asia, texts under scrutiny in my thesis, the institution of World Literature often claims to contain these beyond the fixed borders of national literatures. As noted in the previous chapter, Franco Moretti, one of the chief proponents of the discipline, highlights his object of study in the often-anthologized "Conjectures on World Literature" as "a *problem*" in need of a fresh approach. Concerned with the difficulty of reading the world's "great unread," or the entirety of literary works produced in all human languages, he proposes the quantitative method of "distant reading" as the most effective way to understand the hidden patterns of production, circulation, and reception of literatures on a planetary scale (160–61). Moretti's strategy to map out the evolutionary path of textual circulation in the era of modern capitalism runs exclusively on the premise that a literary text, when granted entry into the global stock exchange of literature, is invariably subject to "one" but "profoundly unequal" hierarchy, termed the "world literary system" ("161).

Although Moretti goes a long way to expose sites of "growing inequality" in conceptions of World Literature ("Conjectures" 161), his interpretive method is deeply entrenched in the Eurocentrism of his approach. Presupposing, for instance, a Darwinian "*law of literary evolution*," and disregarding the worldliness of varied literary traditions beyond geopolitical matters, Moretti argues in the case of "the modern novel" that production of the genre, outside the exceptional cases of Western Europe and North America, is "*always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials" (163). Admittedly informed by the unbalanced divide between the global centre and circumference, Moretti's attitude, as that of his contemporary Pascal Casanova, makes it almost impossible to appreciate aesthetic properties—from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*—beyond the pale of such regulatory designations as "core" and "periphery" that tend to pathologize the literary event based on an immeasurably aesthetic distance from the literary metropole in Paris, London, or New York. A well-intentioned Samaritan with a tragic flaw, Moretti seems unable to unshackle

his “Conjectures” from the delimiting geography upon which his knowledge of the world is produced.

Moretti’s approach has more interesting implications in his earlier work *Modern Epic*, where he studies *Moby-Dick* as a “world text” that maps out, geographically then historically, “the universal dominion of the West” over its peripheral Rest (33–4). Simply put, a “modern epic” is the literary expression of a “world-system” registered through such super-canonical works of Euro-American tradition as *Faust* and *Moby-Dick*, formative constituents of the “world literary system” (44). In the case of the German play, Goethe, who happens to be the earliest proponent of *Weltliteratur*, manifests an “aspiration to world dominance” peppered not by “military conquest” but through a penchant for *incorporation*, that is, “to move speedily from one end to the other of this composite system (Greek periphery in Act III, imperial semi-periphery in Act IV, ‘Dutch’ core in Act V).” In the case of *Moby-Dick*, as I will demonstrate later on, Melville’s imperial will evolves from Goethe’s “dominance of the land to that of the sea,” evident in Ishmael’s many oceanic pontifications: “two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires” (MD 91, ME 45). Moreover, in its capacity to contain an expansive “world” in a single “text,” the modern epic seeks to at once project “sites of combined development” such as Melville’s antebellum America, and extend its “geographical frame of reference” beyond national borders and into “a broader entity—a continent, or the world-system as a whole” (50). Tracing the contours of a Manifest Destiny woven into Ishmael’s seaward narrative, Moretti assumes, not unlike the Americanists of the Cold War, that “[t]he construction of national identity” is superseded in the “world text” by a more “global ambition” (51).

To understand where Fedallah stands in Moretti’s brave new world, we must exorcise the devil of the detail. Focusing on *Faust* (and it is only fair to also summon *Moby-Dick*), Moretti argues that Goethe created a hero who roamed freely around the “grand world,” yearning to be an all-knowing

signifier of humanity at large (ME 13). Yet *Faust*, as an epic of the modern times, differs from its bygone predecessors in that the imperial will of the hero rests entirely on the shoulders of an elusive Other, Mephistopheles (18). Thereby, the “epic expansion” of *Part II*, though eventually claimed by Faust himself, is executed more directly by Mephistopheles: “he invents paper money, sets the Empire on fire,” and “fights a civil war” (ibid). Developing as a character to initially seduce the hero in order to render his innocence, Moretti opines, Mephistopheles is strategically employed to protect Faust from the sheer violence of his own actions. Courtesy of the Devil, therefore, “a strategy is born that will be fundamental for the modern epos, indeed for the whole of Western culture.” That is, “a projection of violence outside oneself. Goethe’s brilliant and terrible discovery: the rhetoric of innocence” (25).

Further on, Moretti extends the complex bond between Faust and Mephistopheles and highlights the significance of the “rhetoric of innocence” to Euro-American cultures of imperialism. Quoting Georg Lukàcs in *Goethe and His Age*, “capital running with blood,” Moretti identifies Mephistopheles as the figure that strategically contains the paradox at the heart of a capitalist Europe—“proud of its own world dominion” yet inclined “to overlook the violence sustaining it” (ME 26). Similarly, *Moby-Dick*, the American “world text,” is fraught with such “masking mechanisms” that simultaneously confirm *and* deny “the necessity of violence for the West’s civilized life.” Ahab’s aggression, Moretti points out, is directed only at an animal, and the epic hero is “split between the innocuous Ishmael and the satanic Ahab” (ibid). Extending his Marxist critique, Moretti even recognizes Ahab’s monomania as another device to camouflage the more violent side of the character as a “captain of industry” (32). Thus, Ahab is proclaimed “the most Faustian of nineteenth-century heroes” as Faust *and* Mephistopheles combined in one riotous body and tortured soul (32–33). At this point in Moretti’s argument, I cannot but wonder where Fedallah fits in such gruesome state of affairs.

“(Melville’s Mephistopheles, Fedallah, is an insignificant figure),” declares Moretti in a pair of parentheses, closeting the Parsee’s influence in one ruthless stroke of the pen (33). Proceeding to conclude his discussion of *Faust* and *Moby-Dick*, super-canonical “world texts” in the nineteenth-century, Moretti views both texts as busy at work embodying and hiding violence, and foregrounding “the universal dominion of the West” (34). Like most law-abiding readers of *Moby-Dick* such as the Cold War Americanists, Moretti fails to acknowledge Fedallah’s capacity to read across the comfort zone of the novel as a “world text.” In contrast to Moretti, and in search of a “proleptic narrative” not just in *Moby-Dick* but also against the grain of his Eurocentric conception of World Literature, I have proposed there must be more *significance* to Fedallah than a *parenthesized* incarnation of Evil speechless against a Faustian Ahab or Ishmaelite America. Furthermore, in an effort to rearticulate Fedallah’s voice against Ishmael’s seaward expansion and through a comparative dialogue with two Persian literary counterparts, I will also counter Moretti’s monolithic appreciation of *Moby-Dick* at the epistemic core of an unequal “world literary system.”

Revisiting the “bill” of Ishmael’s Providence, his “WHALING VOYAGE” in a much-contested world (*MD* 29), it is now possible to revisit *Moby-Dick* from a different angle. While Ishmael’s self-aggrandizing voice—ordained by “the Fates” since time immemorial—may still define for the likes of F.O Matthiessen, Richard Chase, and now Franco Moretti the monologic surface of the narrative, it is no longer as significant to those who venture to read from inside the belly of Moby Dick. By this I am referring to a subversive strategy that requires the similar extent of soul searching leading to responsibility that characterized Jonah’s biblical revelation. Perforce, my self-reflexive interpretation of *Moby-Dick* finds in Fedallah a presence (rather than absence) and a voice (rather than silence) that firstly repudiates “the Fates” of Ishmael’s Manifest Destiny as a definitive force, and secondly calls to task the twentieth-century body of criticism that reductively imposed itself on Melville’s subversive text. With a “critical



consciousness,” following Edward Said, I attempt to bring about a form of *resistance* to established theoretical angles on *Moby-Dick*:

[T]o open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory. (“Traveling Theory” 211)

The capacity for Fedallah to be re-historicized is one of such “concrete instances” that stand “outside” the corpus of scholarly works on *Moby-Dick*. Normatively, Fedallah is either the unalterably “Islamicized” representation of the Orient in antebellum America (Marr 230), or the allegorical prototype of an “all-encompassing East” that has enthused many since the Cold War (Leroux 425). However, in addition to its twofold temporal zones, *Moby-Dick* also occupies a third space in which Fedallah leaps “beyond the interpretive area” of such reductive approaches as Moretti’s that fail to recognize the *significance* of a “minor character” to the hidden layers of the narrative. Moreover, by way of reading the novel as a text conscious of its tripartite moments—from the nineteenth-century to the Cold War to our open-ended present, Fedallah partakes in a comparative dialogue with his Persian literary and cinematic counterparts, Fassih’s *The Story of Javid*, Dowlatabadi’s *Missing Soluch*, and Naderi’s *The Runner*. Accordingly, Melville’s Parsee is a time traveller crossing temporal and spatial gaps between two politically entangled but culturally giving spheres that are intimately connected to the wider world.

The outcome will be the inevitable break of boundaries not just between national literatures isolated through geopolitical conflicts, but also amongst literary traditions violently wedded as World Literature. A survey of literary history irrespective of Goethean aspirations for *Weltliteratur* reveal several moments of cross-cultural exchange: American literary works have found their way on the shelves of readers throughout the Persianate world. Simin Daneshvar, the first Iranian woman novelist, is the translator of *Dagh-i Nang*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, into Persian with a critically

acclaimed success to render a seventeenth-century Puritan setting accessible to a Muslim readership in the twentieth-century (Jeffrey 81). Further west, during the American Renaissance, “Tale VII” of Saadi’s *Gulistan*, the twelfth-century Persian poet, seems to have intrigued Melville’s imagination in the nineteenth-century, allegedly leading to the birth of the Alabama boy Pip in *Moby-Dick*. In fact, Melville’s personal copy of *Gulistan* reveals “three interlocked checks” on the margins of “Tale VII” (Finkelstein 99). By the same token, my trans-temporal appreciation of Fedallah by aligning the character with three parallels in Persian *Adab*—Javid, Mergan, and Amiru—is an endeavour that shuns—like Daneshvar, like Melville—such neo-imperial divisions as “cores” and “peripheries” that constitute the fabric of World Literature. As such, there is no longer room for Moretti’s canonization of *Moby-Dick* as a “world text” that exiles Fedallah’s vision to a cul-de-sac of insignificance, much to the detriment of a comparative approach that could expand his horizon.

The following reading of *Moby-Dick* develops in two sections and evolves with Fedallah at a new epicentre of an allegorical text in which to relocate the contemporary figure of the character in my thesis. In “Meeting the Devil in Disguise,” I trace the chronological pattern of Fedallah’s development in the narrative to demonstrate that his physiognomy in general and his voice in particular are strategically denied through an aesthetic apparatus of silence. At the core of my argument, following Carolyn Porter, will be the notion that Ishmael’s establishment as a participant observer of Melville’s fictional world is contingent upon Fedallah’s lack of an articulate voice. In other words, Ishmael’s narrative of survival beginning afloat Queequeg’s coffin at the expense of Fedallah’s demise, finally coming full circle—back in America—to the opening line, “Call me Ishmael” (*MD* 25), is at least in part made possible by way of keeping Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” at bay. Reducing him to an “unearthly voice” and a threat to “the blessed light of the evangelical land” (261, 271), Ishmael silences Fedallah’s vision in good order to articulate that of his own.

Nevertheless, Fedallah's silence is indicative of an untold story yet to materialize, which renders the character a Venetian Marco Polo without his *Travels* or, more preferably, a Shirazi Saadi without his *Gulistan*. In the second section, "Call Me Fedallah," I argue that Fedallah possesses an inherent potential to resist and desist the grand narrative of silence at the heart of *Moby-Dick*, which fosters his image as a "muffled mystery" in the mind of the reader (MD 270). Such is a twofold capacity that firstly entails a cosmopolitanism manifest in the physical attributes of the character under what Timothy Marr terms "[t]he composite characterization of Fedallah" (230): his Perso-Arabic name, Indo-Chinese attire, and geographic mobility from West Asia to North America all the way back to East Asia. Secondly, and more importantly, Fedallah subverts the strictures of his silence in a unique moment of voluble autonomy during "The Whale Watch" where he attempts to deter Ahab from pursuing Moby Dick, crying out, "Take another pledge, old man" (555). As such, Fedallah will attain the metaphoric agency to open his story, despite the punishing depths of Ishmael's self-aggrandizing narrative of survival, on a tone liberated from the canonical confines of *Moby-Dick* as a Cold War allegory nationally conceived or a "world text" globally writ large.

### Meeting the Devil in Disguise

The *Gams* in *Moby-Dick* are significant moments of cross-cultural exchange when Melville pits two whaling vessels against each other, mostly to highlight the peculiarities of the *Pequod* in contrast to the other ship. The *Gam* with the *Rachel*, for instance, highlighted Ahab's monomania (MD 589), and the encounter with the French *Rose-Bud* is a comical portrayal of gullibility to highlight Stubb's duplicity (459). The encounter in "Leg and Arm" is on one level an extension of Ishmael's previous assertion that English vessels often assert "a kind of metropolitan superiority over the American whalers" (278). Seeking retaliation in defying augury, Ahab's resolve to chase Moby Dick is a mortifying response to Captain Boomer, who has chosen to appease the

pain of loss in joviality. Comparing the two captains would therefore highlight the *Pequod's* bleak atmosphere as opposed to the *Samuel Enderby's* festive mood. A closer look at this juxtaposition reveals two angles to view the *Gam* as the best example of Fedallah's characterization in *Moby-Dick*.

As the two captains Ahab and Boomer are introduced, shaking "bones together!—an arm and a leg," we realize that both ivory parts stand for the organs swallowed by Moby Dick (MD 490–91). All is thus set in place for a British variant of *Moby-Dick* playfully crafted to reiterate how (and by the end why) the *Pequod* is destined to chase its game. "He's all a magnet," says Ahab to Boomer who in turn chooses to undermine Ahab's commitment to hunt down the Whale (495). The juxtaposition grows more effective as more parallels are exposed. When asked by Ahab, for instance, to recount his battle with Moby Dick, Boomer introduces Bunger as his narrator. An instant caricature of Ishmael, Bunger's resemblance to Melville's narrator is uncanny. Equally fascinated with the whales' anatomy, Bunger is not reluctant to interrupt the course of action to rave about his scientific enthusiasm. In the following passage, for instance, Bunger's pedantic discourse can easily fit in one of Ishmael's drafts of cetology:

[Bunger began] very gravely and mathematically bowing to each Captain in succession—"Do you know, gentlemen, that the digestive organs of the whale are so inscrutably constructed by the Divine Providence, that it is quite impossible for him to completely digest even a man's arm? (494)

Evidently "Leg and Arm" establishes a distant variation of the *Pequod* in the image of *Samuel Enderby*, both haunted by the same Whale, manned by parallel figures, but immensely different in the manner they deal with their predicaments. To approach this particular discrepancy, I propose to view the *Gam* as an incomplete puzzle with a missing piece (that being Fedallah in Ishmael's mind) camouflaged in the texture of the narrative, and revealed only in the closing paragraphs of the chapter. The brief journey between the *Pequod* and the *Samuel Enderby* begins with Ahab's command, "Man the boat!" (MD 489). But despite this tacit suggestion that Ahab's Manilla men,

Fedallah chief amongst them, are accompanying him to the English vessel (495), the rest of the *Gam* is predominated by Ahab, Boomer, Bungler, all saturated in Ishmael's narrative voice. And yet, throughout all the commotion—inquiries on the whereabouts of Moby Dick, affectionate jokes, lessons in cetology, and resentful arguments—there is the silent presence of Fedallah lurking in the background, standing unobtrusively by Ahab's side, ignored by the entirety of the participants, thus unnoticed by the reader. It is not until the last three paragraphs and only with Ahab's abrupt departure that Fedallah's existence is finally acknowledged.

When finally addressed as to whether his captain is insane, Fedallah's response is as ghostly as his hitherto shadowy presence: "putting a finger on his lip, [Fedallah] slid over the bulwarks to take the boat's steering oar, and Ahab, swinging the cutting-tackle towards him, commanded the ship's sailors to stand by to lower" (MD 495). At a critical juncture in the rift between Ahab and Boomer, Fedallah's apparition is in fact the decisive moment of his entrance and Ahab's departure, beginning with a pantomimic gesture of silence ("putting a finger") followed by a shushing command ("on his lip"), being handed "the cutting-tackle" as if responsible to terminate the chapter's comic relief, and finally leading Ahab back to the fatal *Pequod* (495). Such dramatic chain of action is not the only occasion when Fedallah, an inaudible *deus ex machina*, descends on the centre stage as a plot device to thwart Ahab's further involvement with a sound judgement that could potentially save him from his suicidal quest. A similar encounter marks the closing lines of "The Symphony" where a mellowed and dejected Ahab, following an emotional dialogue with Starbuck (603–5), is startled by the chillingly "fixed eyes" of Fedallah reflected in the Pacific (606), shattering the last remnant of the reader's illusion that Ahab might possibly return ashore: "Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail" to stop this (ibid, Figure 2). It is remarkable that the chapter immediately following this line is "The Chase—First Day" (607), a narrative point of no return culminating in the *Pequod's* wreck.

“Leg and Arm” is also indicative of Fedallah’s characterization on a more nuanced level in highlighting Ishmael’s detached narration in contrast to Fedallah’s silent presence. It is notable that the retrospective structure of the narrative in *Moby-Dick* foregrounds a crucial gap between Ishmael-as-narrator and Ishmael-as-character. For David Bradley, Ishmael’s “bimodal” narration is an effective strategy to engender “a loophole in the rules of point of view” (132). While it is the adventurous character that has physically experienced and partially perceived the events of plot, it is the mature narrator who imaginatively provides the single existing account of the voyage. Chronologically speaking, between the immediacy of leaving the “insular city of Manhattoes” in the past and the self-aggrandizing moment of “Call me Ishmael” at the narrative present (*MD* 25), Ishmael has had ample “time for rumination, research, and artistic expression” in order “to dramatize what he believes or calculates [to have] happened” to the *Pequod* and its crew (Bradley 133). Therefore, with regard to Fedallah’s role in “Leg and Arm,” there will always be the possibility that the autobiographical story of Ishmael-as-narrator has miscalculated the events that actually happened to Ishmael-as-character and, like a false prophet with a narrative vengeance, misrepresented the Parsee by way of glossing over his “proleptic narrative.”

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 2. “Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail,” illustrated by Patrick Benson

In fact, that the *Gam* with the *Samuel Enderby* involves the physical involvement of all the parallel figures from both sides of the Atlantic except Ishmael is interesting, particularly since Fedallah, seemingly the extra figure, does not fit in any one-on-one paradigm. Four elemental pairs tie this Anglo-American encounter: the two vessels, Ishmael and Bunger, Ahab and Boomer, and above all, the “Leg and Arm” now possessed by Moby Dick. Yet Ishmael, we must bear in mind, has conspicuously detached himself from the *Gam* only to narrate it through his bird’s-eye view and from aboard

the *Pequod*, while it is Fedallah who accompanies Ahab as his “lad” —like Bunker to Boomer (MD 492). What I am suggesting is that Ishmael’s narrative of survival — embedded at the core of *Moby-Dick*, crafted years after the narrator’s return to America — can only resonate in contrast to the silence of Fedallah’s untold story. This dichotomy, I maintain, highlights the intertwined significance of Ishmael’s detached narration and Fedallah’s silent presence not simply in “Leg and Arm” but more generally throughout the narrative.

Bunker’s attachment to Boomer is the joyous and affable bond sorely coveted by Ishmael. That is, when Bunker speaks of the “diabolical passions” of Boomer — suggesting that in spite of the *Samuel Enderby*’s festive mood, Boomer is nevertheless traumatized (MD 493), Ishmael could not possibly dream of reaching out to Ahab’s diabolical disposition the way the two Brits do through bonds of friendship. Compare Boomer and Bunker’s light-hearted exchange in “I’d rather be killed by you than kept alive by any other man” (493) with the number of times Ishmael engages in direct dialogue with Ahab: none. Ishmael, of course, has constantly attested to the mysterious chemistry that yokes Ahab to Fedallah, famously reflected in the “forethrown shadow” of Ahab embracing the “abandoned substance” of Fedallah (597). In a sense, then, Fedallah’s quiet appearance at the end of “Leg and Arm” is Ishmael’s reluctant acknowledgement of Fedallah’s presence within the enclosed circle of Ahab’s allies, from which he no doubt is excluded. It is in other words Fedallah, not Ishmael, who potentially mirrors Bunker as Ahab’s confidant, “lad,” and bosom friend (492). So as to why Ishmael does not participate in the *Gam*, and chooses instead to report it from afar, one can only speculate. Perhaps, no one asked him to. There is, however, sufficient evidence to believe that the firmly established position of Ishmael as the narrator of *Moby-Dick* owes a great deal to Fedallah’s “disappearance” (not to mention Queequeg’s coffin). On the third day of chase, Ishmael reports:

It so chanced, that after the Parsee’s disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab’s bowsman, when that

bowsman assumed the vacant post [of Fedallah]; the same [I], who, when on the last day the three men were tossed from out the rocking boat, was dropped astern [and floated away from the fatal blow]. (638)

It is evident that Ishmael's assumption of Fedallah's role and increasing distance from Ahab's demise towards "the margin of the ensuing scene" formed a fateful chain of events through which he miraculously survived and earned the privilege of narrating *Moby-Dick* (MD 638). The account of the parallels in "Leg and Arm" is, by the same token, a narrower manifestation of Ishmael's strategy in remaining almost detached from the main course of action, rigorously observing the events of plot, holding Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" at bay, and fostering his image as a stereotype of seduction and silence. Thereby, Fedallah's capacity for speech is either completely bowdlerized since it is, in Ishmael's judgement, too blasphemous "under the blessed light of the evangelical land" (261), or at best reduced to an "unearthly voice" echoing an alarming effect of ambiguity (271). By way of filling up the vacant seat of Bunger in "Leg and Arm," I finally suggest that Ishmael's narrative voice usurps the prospective story of Fedallah and instead "assumes," in Carolyn Porter's words, "a detached contemplative stance not only toward an objective world [in our case, the microcosm of *Moby-Dick*], but toward the objectified constructs of his own mind [with Fedallah as the boldest example]" (25).

However, according to Porter's study of the participant observer, Ishmael has already betrayed the position of a detached narrator in the opening line of the novel, "Call me Ishmael" (MD 25). That is, although the "Epilogue" quotes the messenger to Job in its epigraph, "And I am escaped alone to tell thee" (638), *Moby-Dick* never turns full circle to "Call me Job." It is rather the outcast Ishmael, recognized "in the nineteenth century [United States] as the Abrahamic ancestor of Arabs" (Marr 232), whom Melville appropriates in the opening line. By doing so, Marr suggests, Melville undermines "the enclosed nature of Christian supremacy by rendering God's covenant with humanity more open, democratic, and inclusive of the



outcasts" (233). Although Marr's fresh interpretation of Ishmael is conducive to my approach, it is important to note that the fixedly centralized and articulate presence of Ishmael stands in stark contrast to the silence of the marginalized Fedallah, the *ne plus ultra* of all outcasts and exiles of *Moby-Dick*. In other words, Ishmael's opening identification with an exilic symbol that places him in the same world as Fedallah does in a sense contradict his "detached" and "contemplative stance" (Porter 25), particularly when confronted with the Parsee, the utmost isolate, whom Ishmael needs to alienate and render silent in order to at least in part highlight the distinctiveness of his own narrative. Finally, such occasions as the end of "Leg and Arm" are moments of "scandal," in Porter's words, when "the detached observer" is resituated "as a participant within the carefully framed picture he confronts" (31-2).

This "carefully framed picture" is what I term the "aesthetics of silence" at the heart of Fedallah's portrayal in *Moby-Dick*. Such are the richly wrought narrative strategies employed to foster a deep-seated state of inarticulacy and a substantial lack of actualization flattening the character. Fedallah is categorically muted firstly to project, through his unsettling lack of discourse, the tyranny and impending destruction of Ahab, and secondly to highlight the entitlement of Ishmael to life and narration. Such "aesthetics of silence" is also in line with Toni Morrison's seminal discovery of the "sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" in American literature by white authors (17)—albeit with a significant twist in geographical frame of reference. In fact, what Morrison understands as "the literary techniques of 'othering' so common to American literature," evident for instance in Edgar Allan Poe's *Gordon Pym*, is potentially broader in application in our specific case of Fedallah: "estranger language, metaphoric condensation, fetishizing strategies, the economy of stereotype, allegorical foreclosure; strategies employed to secure his characters' (and his readers') identity" (58). Though not an "Africanist presence" in Morrison's estimate, Fedallah is the most dehumanized and least externalized of Melville's *isolatoes*. Of all the major characters in Ahab's

circle, he speaks the least amount of words, and is the most conspicuous target of suspicion and sustained xenophobia amongst the crew. If the likes of Pip, Fleece, and Queequeg serve as reassuring or “companionably ego-reinforcing” figures for their white counterparts Ahab, Stubb, and Ishmael respectively (Morrison 8), in Fedallah the crew find an Oriental foil. Fedallah is thus predicated not just on the dichotomy of skin-colour, but also on that of global hemisphere, alienated as the invisibly silent centre of an abstracted East, and the antithesis of all that is real, sensible, mortal, and angelic.

My insistence on an aesthetic apparatus of silence in *Moby-Dick* is thus informed by Melville’s construction of Fedallah as a fetishized figure to the paradoxical effect of fossilizing his presence as a deceptive incarnation of evil. As Amelia Jones states in a conversation with Derrida’s *Truth in Painting*, “[t]he aesthetic works both to contain otherness by reducing the other to beautiful object and to erect the subject of judgement as Master” (219). In a way, then, the oppositional relationship between “the artist” and “the objects of exchange” attest to the “lived experience” in Euro-American artistic expression that has constantly leaned towards “a partition of subjects into endlessly negotiated dialectics of Master and Slave” (ibid). An impressive case in point is the painterly description of Fedallah at the outset of the chapter “The Spirit-Spout,” a *nocturnal landscape* drawn to highlight the sinister influence of the Parsee’s “unearthly voice” on the crew. Once the chapter opens to “one serene and moonlight night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver,” Ishmael confronts the reader with a poetic exposition of Fedallah: “You may think with what emotions...the seamen beheld this old Oriental perched aloft at such unusual hours; his turban and the moon companions in the sky” (MD 271). Fedallah is thus characterized, and beautifully refashioned, so as to accentuate a sinister sense of diabolism on the crew. There are interests served, Jones rightly concludes, “by the rhetoric of beauty” (222).

A close examination of Fedallah’s pattern of appearance and dissolution in *Moby-Dick* reveals a deep-seated state of inaction and silence at

the core of the narrative. As evident in one of Ishmael's earlier remarks, the "hair-turbaned Fedallah remained a muffled mystery to the last" (*MD* 270). In closer examination, the fabric of Fedallah's characterization is woven out of an indeterminate silence ("muffled mystery") and spun from an eternal passivity ("to the last"). It is interesting how this voiceless enigma is juxtaposed against the cacophony of action that steer the *Pequod* to its doom, then is ironically held accountable for its ultimate demise. As so far suggested, the "aesthetics of silence" underlying the construction of Fedallah's identity display a "carefully framed picture" through which Ishmael, the detached narrator, views the world of *Moby-Dick* (Porter 31). In other words, Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," silenced at the end of "Leg and Arm," remains literally muffled throughout the rest of Ishmael's story of survival and redemption.

Prior to his first and much startling appearance at the end of "The Mat-Maker," three incidents have foreshadowed Fedallah's presence on the *Pequod*. The first is Ishmael's rhetorical question early in the first chapter as to why "the old Persians" revered the sea (*MD* 27). Asked in an effort to validate his penchant for the sea voyage ahead, the question also arises curiosity since it reminds the vigilant reader of Fedallah, the Zoroastrian character who is yet to emerge. Not only does the Parsee descend from the same line of ancestry ("old Persians"), his very presence on board the *Pequod* is no doubt associated with the holiness of ocean (with water being the primordial element). As a result, Ishmael's initial musings on seafaring also prelude a character whose far-off reality is already predicated on a ritual pilgrimage. The second incident to foreshadow Fedallah's emergence occurs during Ahab's monologue in "Sunset." In the midst of his self-obsessed and egomaniacal expression of dissent (crying out "I" ten times in one breath), Ahab suddenly speaks of a "prophecy," which had foreseen the dismemberment of his leg long before the actual events of plot took hold:

What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The

prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and — Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. (201-2)

It is not too difficult to imagine that there is only one Tiresias figure that could have accompanied Ahab in the previous voyage. However, whether it actually was Fedallah who prophesied the dismemberment is not specified — nor is it the case here. While the mere reference to a first “prophecy” is suggestive enough, the second foreshadowing of Fedallah is not so much the direct reference to the first as the deliberate evasion of the second prophecy that foresees the tragedy of *Moby-Dick*. In other words, it is Ahab’s replacement of Fedallah’s prophecy with his own egomaniacal defiance (I will “be the prophet and fulfiller one”) that precedes Fedallah *and* his notes of warning, namely, “Have I not said, old man, that neither hearse nor coffin can be thine?” “Believe it or not, thou canst not die till it [the second hearse] be seen” and “Take another pledge, old man...Hemp [a whale line] only can kill thee” (MD 554-55). In short, the second prelude to Fedallah is the foreshadowing of his *silence* as his potentially redemptive prophecy is being deliberately muted through Ahab’s Byronic defiance. When the prophecy is finally disclosed during the two men’s last conversation in “The Whale Watch” (ibid), it is rather too late, and Ahab is too lost in egomania.

The last prelude to complete a threefold foreshadowing of Fedallah occurs in “Hark!” wherein Archy, one of the cordon, is abruptly startled with a clandestine movement in the lower deck, giving rise to a heated rumour that “there is somebody down in the after-hold” and that “our old Mogul [Ahab] knows something of it too” (MD 232). Though episodic in nature and irrelevant to the overall progression of plot, this short chapter is highly indicative of the atmosphere in which Fedallah will shortly emerge. Firstly, Archy’s suspicion hints at the clandestine and incidental existence of a character, who generally requires a “Hist!” to find and very “sharp ears” to notice — particularly evident, as I demonstrated, at the end of “Leg and Arm.” Secondly, and more importantly, the crew’s anxiety about Ahab’s potential engagement in a secretive alliance is so intense that the captain’s

status should immediately degrade, in their minds, to that of an “old Mogul” (232), a provocative hint at the Orientalist spectre of despotism haunting the *Pequod* (Marr 224). By the time Fedallah finally appears “fresh formed out of air,” exacerbating the bleak state of the “dark Ahab” (MD 253), the reader has been warned of the hardly audible, often-glossed over, yet significantly prophetic reality of the Parsee—in short, “a muffled mystery to the last” (270).

As a physical being, Fedallah first appears in “The First Lowering,” accompanied by a group of “phantoms” later called the Manilla men, as he whispers his first word to Ahab, “Ready,” in a characteristically “half-hissed” tone (MD 254). Of course, the exposition of Fedallah’s physique, instantly impressive and awful to Ishmael, has preceded his first words in order to render them more foreboding. In other words, the sound of Fedallah’s “Ready” is more sinister in tone knowing that it was uttered through those “steel-like lips” unable to cover that “white tooth evilly protruding” against the listener (*ibid*). Furthermore, the appearance of his clothes and the darkness of his skin seem to rhyme with the potentially xenophobic anxiety of Ishmael’s narrative voice. Five references in one breath to the darkness of skin and attire vouch for the importance of Fedallah’s racial markedness to Ishmael’s first impression of the character: a macabre “jacket of black cotton funereally invested” his “swart” body, and those “wide black trousers of the same dark stuff” covered all that “ebonness” (*ibid*).

Ishmael goes on to bowdlerize the account of Ahab’s conversation with his “tiger yellow crew,” Fedallah chief amongst them, for being apparently too blasphemous to repeat “under the blessed light of the evangelical land” (MD 261). The deliberate effacement of Fedallah’s voice, regardless of the utterance, dominates his immediate surroundings for what truly concerns Ishmael is the impact of the unheard dialogue, and the dehumanizing effect that it bears on the captain’s disposition—“when, with tornado brow, and eyes of red murder, and foam-glued lips, Ahab leaped

after his prey" (ibid). One can only wonder if Ishmael is describing Ahab the protagonist, or the predatory "infidel sharks" which he deliberately prefigures to achieve an alarming effect of ambiguity (ibid). Nevertheless, by the time the lengthy exposition of Fedallah is set forth, the reader has been tacitly warned of the character's influence on the *Pequod's* "Old Mogul." Apparently, pontificates Ishmael, "one cannot sustain an indifferent air concerning Fedallah":

He was such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly; but the like of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent—those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth's primal generation. (270)

In a passage replete with implicit and explicit pairings of far-fetched descriptions and sweeping generalizations, Ishmael establishes rigid stereotypes and worlds of difference between a "civilized" and progressive lot of humanity on the one hand, and Fedallah's "ghostly" and aboriginal Orient on the other. Since time immemorial, "when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection," Ishmael informs, the world as lived and experienced by the Parsee has literally remained intact (*MD* 270). The indeterminacy of such character exposition in introducing Ahab's closest ally through such outlandish speculations, and in such suffocating historical vacuum at that, is of great use to a highly anxious crew flabbergasted with the monomania of their captain. Take, for instance, the enigmatic atmosphere surrounding the Parsee juxtaposed with Ishmael's uncertain but anxiously speculative thoughts on Ahab's "fortunes"—apparent in the abundant use of subjunctive and hypothetical structures:

Whence he came in a mannerly world like this, by what sort of *unaccountable* tie he soon evinced himself to be linked with Ahab's peculiar fortunes; *nay*, so far as to have some sort of *half-hinted* influence; *Heaven knows*, but it *might* have been even authority over him; all this *none knew*. (270, emphases added)

Consequently, the crew's concern surrounding Ahab and their antagonism towards Fedallah heighten as the captain slips further into madness. In the meantime, Fedallah grows less and less quiet, his presence less and less perceptible. In two of the highly ritualistic chapters, "The Forge" and "The Candles," where Fedallah has ostensibly inspired much of the captain's thoughts and deeds, he is completely dissolved into the background. In the evident absence of visual – much less auditory – images, we perceive, thanks to Stubb's abusive retort, the reverential, ghostlike, and silent passage of Fedallah from across the fire (*MD* 544). Elsewhere, when he does appear as a ritual priest "kneeling in front of Ahab's front," his head is conspicuously "bowed away" from the main course of action, rendered as distanced and disinterested (563). All this, I have tried to demonstrate at some length, are part and parcel of a formulaic pattern of characterization that predicate the existence of Fedallah on silence and passivity. Finally, before arriving at the contours of his "proleptic narrative," it helps to follow Fedallah's footsteps a bit further into the denouement of Ishmael's narrative of survival.

Shortly before the three fatal and final chapters, consecutively titled "The Chase," Ishmael casts one last look at Ahab, Fedallah, and the spell that has bound them together. Sheer fatalism and foreboding doom characterize the overall atmosphere wherein all characters anxiously await Ahab's now inevitable encounter with Moby Dick. Ishmael, perhaps in another effort to cope with anxiety, casts his scolding gaze on Fedallah, "half-uncertain" – speaking on behalf of the crew – whether the Persian harpooner is "a mortal substance, or else a tremulous shadow" (*MD* 596). Furthermore, through another dehumanizing description, Ishmael reiterates the collective anxiety of the *Pequod* at the frightening sight of Ahab spending his sleepless nights alongside the ever so wakeful Parsee. Even more disturbing is the total lack of "verbal interchange" between the two as if "a potent spell" yoked them together (*ibid*). Thereby, Ishmael repeats the dominant perception of the character as a disembodied spirit "as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown *shadow*, in Ahab the Parsee his *abandoned substance*" (emphases added, 597). At this point, Ishmael unearths my central concern that

Fedallah's characterization is predicated on a categorical rejection of any external and physical sense of reality, which is, by extension, a deliberate and strategic rejection of the character's human agency. Take, for instance, Ishmael's final reflections on the curious plight of Ahab:

And yet, somehow, did Ahab—in his own proper self, as daily, hourly, and every instant, commandingly revealed to his subordinates,—Ahab seemed an independent lord, the Parsee but his slave. Still again both seemed yoked together, and an unseen tyrant driving them; the lean shade siding the solid rib. For be this Parsee what he may be, all rib and keel was solid Ahab. (597)

In an unforgivably white supremacist and considerably elegiac tone, Ishmael yearns for a *normal* ("daily, hourly") Ahab whose attitude towards Fedallah is strictly defined in terms of a return to the master-slave dialectic. Ishmael wishfully seeks not the miserable Ahab kidnapped to the ghostly terrains of a heterotopian Orient, but that "independent lord" for whom Fedallah is a mere "slave." To Ishmael, apparently, Ahab is no longer endowed with the "non-raced" privileges of whiteness, to borrow Richard Dyer's words, "to speak for the commonality of humanity" since bonding with Fedallah has already taken its toll (2). Only in his "proper self" could Ahab ever return in a right mind to Nantucket to join his wife and son, help *Rachel* and Captain Gardiner find their missing children, and even avoid making Ishmael twice an orphan. Ishmael articulates such desires by reinstating the dichotomy that separates the "proper self" of Ahab in all his glory ("the solid rib") from the insubstantial existence of the Parsee ("the lean shade"). Compared with Joseph Conrad's words in *Heart of Darkness*, where he describes African bodies as "moribund shapes," "free as air—and nearly as thin" (1964), Ishmael's description of Fedallah bears the same weight of structural violence "[f]or be this Parsee what he may be, all rib and keel was solid Ahab" (MD 597). To Ishmael's rueful mind, Ahab's commanding self, solidly cast in bones, flesh, and blood must be separated from the silenced ghost of Fedallah, whose physical reality is categorically denied, and at best reduced to chance and coincidence ("be this Parsee what he may be").



This human-subhuman polarity is re-secured in "The Symphony," where an extremely defamiliarizing portraiture of Ahab's humanity is set against the deadly apparition of Fedallah, who emerges to haunt the last sentence of the chapter. In a similar fashion as "Leg and Arm," Fedallah is completely rendered invisible throughout the chapter only to appear in the last line to highlight what Ahab could have possibly been in a world without his Mephistopheles. The moment the chapter begins with the acknowledgement of "the gentle thoughts of the feminine air" as opposed to the "murderous thinkings of the masculine sea" (*MD* 602), it is evident what Ishmael has laid in store for us. As Ahab enters in his most dejected mood, conscious that his submission to "the masculine sea" is causing his impending destruction, his melancholia takes him up "the feminine air" to reveal a highly refined and sentimental side of his personality hitherto unknown to the reader. There, for example, we finally witness Ahab's rapturous tears shed in the ocean (603), and realize that Ahab, a fifty-eight year old man, has not spent more than three years ashore in the past forty years. In the very "feminine air" of the chapter, Ahab attempts to inhale the scent of his "young girl-wife" whom he has left in Nantucket "to make war on the horrors of the deep" (*ibid*). It is finally by gazing into Starbuck's eyes that the mellowed captain attempts to view in retrospect the pleasures of domesticity hours before giving the fateful chase to Moby Dick. The life-affirming essence of Ahab's sentimentality is also evident in his last orders to his first mate:

Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God. By the green land; by the bright hearth-stone! this is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and child in thine eye. No, no; stay on board, on board!—lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick. (*MD* 604)

Needless to say, the warmly fluid and mellow tone of "The Symphony" apparent in Ahab and Starbuck's dialogue ends in the most disheartening fashion. Following the above exchange, Starbuck's desperate pleas—"Oh, my Captain! my Captain," "let us away! See, see! the boy's face from the

window! the boy's hand on the hill" (*MD* 604–5) – only face Ahab's adamant resolve. And as the first mate despairingly gives up on Ahab, the abandoned captain wanders across the deck. At this critical moment, as Ahab is gazing into the ocean, he "started at two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there. Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail" (Figure 2 above, *MD* 606). Here ends "The Symphony" with a line that immediately precedes "The Chase – First Day," leading soon to the long-anticipated destruction of the *Pequod*. The apparition of the Parsee depicted at this point is, to my mind, the last example of Ishmael's narrative strategies deployed to shatter any remnant of the reader's illusion that Ahab might possibly avoid the fatal encounter with the White Whale. The rigidly motionless and chillingly silent posture of Fedallah, as Ahab finds the Parsee's eyes reflected in the Pacific, is foreshadowing of death and demise.

The "Epilogue," as earlier suggested, is a conclusive case in point in that Ishmael's survival is simply made possible through Melville's ingenious setting of stage, firstly by replacing Fedallah's position as Ahab's bowsman with Ishmael, and secondly by bringing forth Queequeg's coffin to rescue a narrative voice. In other words, with Ishmael's biblical proclamation – that "I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (*MD* 638) – comes the starkly white supremacist statement that it was "the Fates" who ordained the course of action much in favour of the American narrator, however detrimental to the multi-ethnic crew of the *Pequod*. With Queequeg's "coffin" comes a redemptive "life-buoy," and with Fedallah's "disappearance" arrives the life-affirming distance from Ahab's disaster, all culminating in, and coming full circle to, a new baptism – "Call me Ishmael" (25) – rooted, at least etymologically, in the Parsee's part of the world. What is more, the cluster of images closing the "Epilogue" hint at an absolutely empowered position that renders Ishmael's solitude in the Pacific as starkly different from, say, that of Pip when Stubb abandons him to sink in insanity. In the romance of Ishmael's survival, "unharming sharks" intimately glide by, and "savage sea-hawks" fly by "with sheathed beaks" (638) – all celebrating the white man's entitlement to life and narration at the expense of the Others'.

In retrospect, Ishmael as the authoritative narrator of *Moby-Dick* has hardly been able to provide a reliable history of Fedallah. Initially recognized as a member of Ahab's "Manilla men," he stands out as a "subordinate phantom," one of the "queer castaway creatures" often "found tossing about the open sea on planks, bits of wreck, oars, whaleboats, canoes, blown-off Japanese junk" (MD 269-70). Yet despite the above, however solidified through the "aesthetics of silence," Fedallah is textually capable of resisting the grand narratives that foster his silent posture in our minds. Such is a twofold capacity, firstly entailing a cosmopolitanism manifest in his physical attributes and, secondly and more importantly, a crucial ability to outwit the strictures of his silence in an explosive moment of voluble autonomy during "The Whale Watch" where he pleads with Ahab to "Take another pledge" (555). These will eventually bring to the fore the "proleptic narrative" which hung in the balance at the end of "Leg and Arm," and remained untold throughout the narrative. A rejuvenated Fedallah will finally transcend the limits of his "minorness," beyond the nineteenth-century and the Cold War, out of the belly of a "world text," and into a trans-temporal allegory to introduce my critique of World Literature from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*.

### Call Me Fedallah

Following an extensive analysis of the character's "minorness," aesthetically embedded to solidify his silence and passivity, my focus on Fedallah will now transcend both the grain of the narrative as well as the received critical wisdom about his limits. At first, I propose to visualize the Parsee's "glistening white turban" and "rumpled Chinese jacket" as physical attributes of a worldly traveller from West Asia, having joined the *Pequod* "bound round the world" (MD 254, 276). His name, a subject of curiosity to numerous critics, leads to muddier but exciting paths. Fedallah, as noted before, is phonetically aligned with *Fazlullah* (Mercy of God), a name common in Persian and etymologically rooted in the Muslim and Arab

world, a combination of *Fazl* (grace) and *Allah* (God). Unlike Isani, and the likes of Evans and Finkelstein earlier discussed, who take up on the lexical implications of the word – “The Grace of God” – to reveal the possibility of “irony” in the character’s function, given his supposed role as a devil incarnate (Isani “Naming of Fedallah” 388), I suggest that the twofold name of the character, Fedallah the Parsee, has emancipating repercussions for the present-day reader of *Moby-Dick*.

Parsees (also spelt Parsi) are members of the émigré community of Iranian Zoroastrians in India who first landed in Gujarat in AD 936 (Boyce 157). At first sight, the designation invokes both the exilic community in South Asia as well as the pre-Islamic history of parts of West Asia now Eurocentrically referred to as the “Middle East.” All this Melville must have known but, one step ahead of the author, the historically fluid and geographically mobile essence of Fedallah from present-day Iran and India to the US, his Perso-Arabic name, his multi-ethnic appearance, even his perfect fluency in English (not to mention Persian and Avestan with a stretch of imagination) constitute the character as, I would like to imagine, a Shirazi Saadi without his *Gulistan* who occupies a vast and borderless space in the mind of the reader. Contrary to Marr’s assumption that “[t]he composite characterization of Fedallah runs the gamut of the types of the cunning Asian” – quite typical of Melville’s representation of Persian characters in his body of work (221, 230) – I suggest that the potentially cosmopolitan essence of Fedallah paves the way for an alternative reading of *Moby-Dick* in which he is not so much the “devil in disguise” as a silent traveller with an untold story (MD 371).

Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” is textually manifest in “The Whale Watch,” a short chapter close to Ahab’s climatic chases to the White Whale. The most significant but least explored aspect of the chapter is that it contains the single fully externalized episode in the entirety of *Moby-Dick* where Ahab and Fedallah engage in a coherent and intelligible verbal exchange. In only a few pages, Ishmael will tacitly attest to the uniqueness of

this event by confronting us with the fact that the two men “never seemed to speak” despite the “potent spell” that yoked the mysterious pair (*MD* 596). Up until the moment of “The Whale Watch,” and well after it, Fedallah is simply typecast as Ahab’s mute companion whose role in the wreck of the *Pequod* is paradoxically predicated on his cunning passivity. From his very first appearance up to the day of his death on the second day of chase, Fedallah is systematically antagonized, his voice strategically muffled. Yet ironically, what occurs in “The Whale Watch” is thoroughly different from the dominant perceptions of the character as the passive conduit of Ahab’s monomania. To recap, the chapter appears to shape a countercurrent against the main progression of plot, allowing a fresh understanding of Fedallah not as an impersonal foil (“the lean shade”) to contrast Ahab’s potential humanity (“the solid rib” and “proper self” 597), but as a woeful agent set against a monomaniac resolve to confront Moby Dick.

Revealingly, “The Whale Watch” is preceded by one of Ahab’s last asides in “The Dying Whale,” where he stands over a game slain the previous evening, brooding over life and mortality. In contemplation, Ahab notices the “expiring” mammal turning its head towards the sun as “a wondrousness unknown before,” and thus anthropomorphizes the dying whale as a Zoroastrian figure—“most faithful, broad, baronial vassal of the sun!” (*MD* 552). “He too worships fire,” mumbles Ahab, perpetuating the nineteenth-century fallacy about Zoroastrians, not implying whether by “too” he is calling attention to himself or his silent companion, Fedallah. Here I should presume, in light of the dialogue that ensues in “The Whale Watch,” that it is Fedallah whom Ahab aligns with the dying whale. In fact, as Ahab proceeds with his aside, he calls upon the “dark Hindoo half of nature”—or Kali the goddess of destruction (Alter 30)—as he rues the untimely end of the whale as he “sunwards turned his dying head, and then gone round again, without a lesson to me” (*MD* 553). While this “lesson,” according to Robert Zoellner, may be “that all life is subject to irreversible entropic decay” (196), with the onset of “The Whale Watch,” Fedallah, perhaps the reincarnated spirit of the dead whale before Ahab, has a

surprising “lesson” at hand. That is, the momentous revelation behind the Parsee’s sentence, “Take another pledge, old man” (555).

The chapter begins hours after Ahab’s aside, with Fedallah the only man awake in the dead of night keeping watch over four slain whales. The character’s initial posture, as “crouching in the bow,” makes it possible to observe the domestic sharks of *Moby-Dick*, always found around the *Pequod*’s harpooned games. Fedallah, given the circumstances, “sat watching the sharks, that spectrally played round the whale, and tapped the light cedar planks with their tails” (MD 554). This brief reappearance of the sharks focalized in Fedallah’s field of vision are, in their ironic playfulness, chilling reminders of their feast much earlier in “Stubb’s Supper,” where the second mate commanded Fleece, the African-American chef, to prepare him a steak from a recently harpooned whale, while Ishmael kept telling us about a pack of sharks “swarming around the dead leviathan” (336). Spicing up “Stubb’s Supper” *ad nauseam*, Ishmael there proceeded from the second mate’s “sharkish business” to recall the dismal fate of “a dead slave” in the jaws of outrider sharks when thrown off the deck of “slave ships crossing the Atlantic” (ibid). Fedallah’s stern gaze at the masticating sharks of “The Whale Watch” is, to my mind, similarly set against the backdrop of racially charged images as he sits, perhaps reenacting the role performed by Fleece before, observing the sharks in the midst of the xenophobic world surrounding him.

What makes Fedallah’s experience more distinctive than Fleece’s is the biblical allusion employed to turn up the poisonous air of hostility against the character: “A sound like moaning in squadrons over Asphaltites of unforgiven ghosts of Gomorrah, ran shuddering through the air” (MD 554). The significance of this allusion lies in the fact that immediately after it ends the paragraph, Ahab awakes “from his slumbers” as if somewhat startled by the agony of Gomorrah’s inhabitants all the way from south of the Dead Sea. Mere moments before Ahab and Fedallah’s unprecedented dialogue, an allusion predominates the scene that foreshadows the

impending destruction of the *Pequod* in biblical fashion, as a site of sin and wickedness: “Then the LORD rained vpon Sodom & vpon Gomorrah, brimstone and fire, from the LORD of heauen. And he ouerthrew those cities, and all the plaine, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew vpon the ground” (Genesis 19: 24-25). In fact, the simultaneous focus of this biblical hint at the impending doom and, perhaps as importantly, the depravity of Fedallah’s bond with Ahab projects within the broader frame of the narrative the outright antagonism of the crew towards the idea of the two men keeping a “Whale Watch.”

It might therefore seem that the opening paragraphs of the chapter, from recollecting the sharks of the Pacific to recalling the wrath of LORD in Gomorrah, are simply preparing the audience for yet another all-too-familiar assault on the Parsee character, our “devil in disguise” (*MD* 371). This, however, is not the case since the ensuing verbal exchange between Ahab and his bosom-friend is the abrupt explosion of all that has been ascribed to Fedallah and his role in *Moby-Dick*. “The Whale Watch” is often treated as an inventory of the Parsee’s threefold prophecy that foretells Ahab’s fate as bound with the *Pequod*’s destruction. In short, the Parsee has announced, in the form of a riddle, that upon confronting Moby Dick, Ahab is foreordained to witness “two hearses” or funeral biers. Detailing this first prophecy, Fedallah argues, “neither hearse nor coffin can be thine” (554). He also reveals that of the two hearses, “the first [will] not be made by mortal hands,” alluding to his own corpse that will be lashed to Moby Dick, and that “the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America,” referring to the *Pequod*’s physical structure (*ibid*). The second, and perhaps most inconceivable, prophecy is that “I shall still go before thee thy pilot,” suggesting that “I” —Fedallah—will die first but shall re-emerge to “pilot” Ahab to his demise. Finally, the third and most foreshadowing of all is the chilling prophecy that “Hemp only can kill thee,” referring to the whale line that will strangle Ahab to death (555).

What I am proposing with regard to these prophecies is to re-read them neither in a discursive vacuum nor as a roadmap to perdition. Rather, we should bear in mind that Fedallah's statements are disclosed through a rhetorical argument that establishes him as an active participant on the polyphonic canvas of *Moby-Dick* as he pleads with the captain to stop misinterpreting the prophecies. When faced with Ahab's dismissive, derisive, and often sarcastic chain of remarks, Fedallah's unfolding of his prophetic riddle further reveals a human side to the character hitherto (and henceforth) alien to readers and critics. On that account, a mere focus on "The Whale Watch" with Fedallah just insisting on the terms of his prophecies, or else assuming that he is goading Ahab to pursue Moby Dick, will inevitably overlook the underlying rhetoric of the exchange, namely, that Ahab had better "Take another pledge" (555).

Following the reappearance of Melville's sharks and the invocation of the damned spirits of Gomorrah at the outset of the chapter, Ahab, who has been asleep all along, awakes "from his slumbers" to meet his friend in the dreary mood of the *Pequod's* last days, "like the last men in a flooded world" (MD 554). Evidently affected by such apocalyptic mood, both men engage in a debate to revisit the terms of Fedallah's prophecies. While Ahab is inclined to understate chances of failure, claiming against long odds that victory is at hand, Fedallah, who is endowed with supernatural faculties, is certain of impending destruction. Thus opening the debate, Ahab recalls a dream involving some "hearses" that have been haunting him for some time. There in contrast to Fedallah's verdict that the "hearses" should guarantee chaos and death, Ahab's vision appears to have foretold, obliquely but defiantly, that triumph is imminent. Yet in response to Ahab's arrogance, Fedallah takes up a corrective tone that stays with him until the end of the exchange: "Have I not said, old man, that neither hearse nor coffin can be thine," asks Fedallah as he voices the first prophecy (554). And when Ahab retorts that it is practically impossible to be "hearsed" on the high seas, Fedallah elaborates that both "hearses" will no doubt emerge (ibid). Posed again with similar charges, Fedallah extends the argument further into the second



prophecy, foreseeing that he will rise from the dead to “pilot” Ahab down with him (555). Not disheartened by Ahab’s mockeries (“Ha! Such a sight we shall not soon see,” 554), Fedallah has a bone to pick with his captain. Putting the sequence of his statements in order, all follow a similarly counteractive tone in pleading with Ahab—“Believe it not,” “But I said old man” (ibid)—that the White Whale is destined to prevail. Even with the third prophecy, which declares the strangling certainty of death, and to which Ahab responds “with a laugh of derision” and cry of immortality “on land and on sea” (555), Fedallah is poignantly convinced that unless Ahab changes course, the *Pequod* is bound to sink despite three prophecies that were issued to deter rather than seduce.

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 3. “Take another pledge, old man,” illustrated by Benson

Fedallah’s clairvoyant role differs from its Shakespearean source, the final appearance of the Three Witches in *Macbeth*, in that he is established as a concerned character that attempts to discourage rather than tempt. As the Sisters appear before Macbeth in IV.i, they raise three horrid apparitions to issue three foreboding and ultimately destructive prophecies: “Beware Macduff; Beware of the thane of Fife;” “Be bloody...for none of woman born Shall harm Macbeth;” and “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill Shall come against him” (210–11). Fedallah, too, has issued three major prophecies. But in offering a concluding piece of advice, he differs from Shakespeare’s Witches in that he mournfully stares into Ahab’s eyes and, right before informing him that death is imminent, warns him against his misreading of a dream: “Take another pledge, old man” (Figure 3, 555). Melville’s Parsee prophet, I have dared to imagine, is meant to dissuade rather than to goad.

Reading the seminal line, “Take another pledge, old man,” one might argue that the Parsee refers to a third pledge in addition to, and along the

same destructive lines with, Ahab's "two pledges that I shall yet slay Moby Dick and survive it" (*MD* 555). Ahab has taken Fedallah's first two prophecies—that two hearses must be seen on the sea before Ahab can die and that the dead Fedallah must appear to pilot Ahab to his end—as outright impossibilities that prove he will succeed. In other words, Ahab's "two pledges" are haughty disavowals of Fedallah's prophecies, suggesting that Ahab's obstinate resolve, not the Parsee's foresight, steers the *Pequod* into the jaws of Moby Dick. The "hemp" prophecy, which immediately follows Fedallah's call to "another pledge," is an interesting case here as it reveals the extent to which Ahab is absorbed in personal dogma regardless of the Parsee's trepidations (*ibid*). Unlike the enigmatic structure of the first two, the third prophecy is the most pertinent since it refers as cause of death to "hemp," a material quite familiar to a whaler of Ahab's calibre. Yet by insisting to half-jokingly misunderstand the fatal whale line as the hanging "gallows," Ahab's conjecture can neither falsify Fedallah's third prophecy as a third "pledge," nor can it convince the reader that Ahab may actually "slay" and "survive" the beast (*ibid*). Repudiating all three prophecies in consecutive heckling remarks, however, Ahab deludes himself that he will stay alive.

To imagine that Fedallah's response ("Take another pledge, old man") to Ahab's sneering sarcasm ("Well, then, did I believe all ye say, my pilot!") is a further attempt at seduction is to ignore the explosive potential that Fedallah's sentence bears on "The Whale Watch." It is above all the imperative logic registered through the sentence that makes it distinctive against all flat descriptions of the character within and beyond the narrative. From the assertive mood of the verb "Take," to the beckoning of an alternative to Ahab's destructive vows in "another pledge," to the imploring, but thoroughly unprecedented, intimacy of the direct address "old man," the climax of Fedallah's argument deserves closer inspection as it proves significant to my realization of the character's "proleptic narrative" in *Moby-Dick*.

The nucleus of Fedallah's sentence is the phrase "another pledge," which harks back to Ahab's "two pledges" that he can "slay Moby Dick and survive it" (*MD* 555). In comparison, the two characters seem to have employed the word "pledge" in somewhat different senses. Ahab's articulation implies a form of security for achieving a personal goal, which re-confirms his self-absorbed disposition. Following his unspecified dream of the "hearses," and after his dispute with Fedallah, Ahab is convinced that he has "two" imaginary "pledges" that he will be the victor in the battle ahead. These "pledges" are, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, things "given or held as security to guarantee payment of a debt or fulfilment of an obligation," in Ahab's case to himself alone (2.a). Furthermore, Ahab's "pledges" are semantically in line with other applications of the word elsewhere in the novel. In "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael enlightens that "among the Red Men of America the giving of the white belt of wampum was the deepest pledge of honor" (223–24); and in "The Decanter," he informs that Eskimos "pledge each other in bumpers of train oil" (499). By the same token, Ahab's self-deposited "pledges" are, to my mind, forged documents of a personal promise that vow to confirm the captain's immortality in the high seas.

Yet in contrast to Ahab's egomaniacal "pledges," Fedallah's mandate for "another pledge" is more altruistic on the face of it. Though convinced that his suicidal captain will steer ahead ever so obstinately, Fedallah summons Ahab to re-think the chances of triumph, and potentially avoid destruction. Unlike Ahab who draws on his "pledges" to invoke a fraudulent security for success, Fedallah's use of the word is more prophetic. With a full knowledge of the battle's outcome through two "hearses" and a "pilot," as well as the specifics of Ahab's death by "hemp," Fedallah still deems it necessary to plead with Ahab to stop misreading the prophecies ("Believe it not," "But I said, old man," *MD* 554) and avoid fabricating new ones to warrant illusions of self-grandeur ("I am immortal then, on land and sea," 555). Furthermore, the "pledge" in Fedallah's sentence is a less concrete derivative of the word's previous applications by Ishmael and Ahab. It is not

referring to, say, a “white belt of wampum,” a “bumper of train oil,” or a vision of “hearses,” but is rather signifying “A solemn binding promise,” taken by Ahab “to do, give, or refrain from doing something” (AHD, 1.). Such semantic specificity of Fedallah’s application of the word is also confirmed by the determiner “another” which, in my reading, points not to an additionally further but effectively different “pledge.” In other words, as opposed to Ahab’s vows, Fedallah’s invitation to “another pledge” translates into an oath of loyalty to the *Pequod*’s commonweal rather than to Ahab’s ambition and vengeance.

Revisiting “The Chase—Third Day” demonstrates how Fedallah’s beckoning could have proven life affirming. Throughout this fateful chapter, Ahab sails across the terms of Fedallah’s prophecies, realizing hour after hour into the conflict that his own “two pledges” are doomed to fail. A day after Fedallah’s disappearance, Ahab seems convinced that his Parsee companion was merely an imposter, a self-promoting charlatan: “Aye, aye, like many more thou told’st direful truth as touching thyself, O Parsee” (MD 628). But when hours later, well into the heart of darkness, Fedallah’s corpse resurfaces as “Lashed round and round to the fish’s back,” Ahab comes to realize that “*this* then is the [first] hearse that thou didst promise” (631). However, rather than taking a more reminiscing look at “the half torn body of the Parsee”—trying to read his “distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab” as crying, perhaps, “Take another pledge, old man”—Ahab chooses to “hold thee to the last letter of thy word,” calling for “the second hearse” (ibid). In denial, still resolved to project Fedallah’s riddle as logically flawed, Ahab proceeds with the battle until brought to his senses right at the event horizon. As Moby Dick “turns to meet” and devour the *Pequod*, he finally finds the missing link: “The ship! The hearse!—the second hearse,” a vessel made of American wood (635). Yet even then, Ahab refuses to remember the lesson of “The Whale Watch.” Rather than considering the possibility of the “hemp” prophecy materializing since Fedallah has so far been true to his words, Ahab clings to his own false promises: “I turn my body from the sun,” he cries out in the last paragraph of his life, defying Fedallah’s

prophetic authority by way of renouncing a Zoroastrian's Mecca (636). Having finally recognized the inevitability of the first two prophecies while refusing to accept the imminence of the third, Ahab decides not to follow Fedallah's final warning, but to "Sink all coffins and hearses to one common pool!" (ibid). In other words, Ahab's last sentence in *Moby-Dick* is not "*Thus, I take another pledge,*" but, tragically enough, "*Thus, I give up the spear!*" (636).

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee, for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! *Thus, I give up the spear!* (636)

The significance of Fedallah's sentence lies well beyond the consequence of Ahab's immediate actions. By simply following the Parsee's lead to take a different "pledge," Ahab could have returned to Nantucket, doing the marine ecosystem of planet Earth a great service, and avoiding making Ishmael twice an orphan. More importantly, the imperative mood and warning tone of the verb "Take," predicating the sentence on its assertive "another pledge," has a radical impact on the narrative at large. Compared with the "Call" of the narrator's "Call me Ishmael," Fedallah's "Take" conveys a similarly self-contained statement that could extend the Parsee's influence into inconclusive implications. "Take another pledge" and "Call me Ishmael" are both imperative statements that read prophetically. Ishmael's sentence opens a narrative to articulate the single existing account of an allegorical journey that has expanded the world over; Fedallah's statement makes it clear that because he has been aware of the tragic outcome of the voyage, he requires Ahab's trust and authority to try to avert the tragic tide of events. Turning the wheel of fortune, then, the "Take" of Fedallah's sentence, whether or not Melville was artistically conscious of it, has the potential to influence Ishmael's destiny as sole survivor and, by extension, reshape the narrative itself. That is, by taking "another pledge" of his own, Ishmael too could have conveyed a more polyfocal account of the

journey, in which the plurality of the *Pequod's* isolatoes could claim their right to speak and will to mutiny. Because Ishmael's centralized position as the narrator of *Moby-Dick* has led to a glossing over of Fedallah's autonomy, the empowering effect of "Take another pledge" transcends and defies the mere confines of "The Whale Watch" or the three days of "Chase."

Thus far, I have shown how an understanding of Fedallah's proposed "pledge" may launch unprecedented readings of the character's role and shed new light on Ahab's final actions. I have also suggested how the imperative mood of the verb "Take" corresponds to the magnificent "Call" of the narrative opening, pointing in turn to Fedallah's ability to defy Ishmael's textual violence. Finally, in commanding Ahab to "Take another pledge," Fedallah completes his speech act by addressing his captain as an "old man." In this final capacity to establish a unique bond of camaraderie, reflected through the intimate repetition of the phrase "old man," and perhaps only matched by Pip towards the end of the journey, Fedallah proves capable to extend his friendship into an expression of responsibility for the *Pequod's* fate, unparalleled by anyone aboard who has attempted to talk—or force—Ahab out of his "two pledges."

Undoubtedly, addressing Ahab is the most passive form of human interaction in the entirety of *Moby-Dick*. Compared with Fedallah's comfortable utterance of the phrase "old man," the crew demonstrate quite different ways of speaking about or with Ahab. Archy and Stubb, for instance, adhere to the term "old Mogul" to express concern about Ahab's intentions, secretly and in good humour, while struck by Orientalist notions of despotism (*MD* 232, 485). As for Ishmael and Starbuck who frequently use the phrase "old man," theirs is a descriptive term almost always uttered behind Ahab's back to reflect fear, anxiety, or spite. In "The Quadrant" Ishmael describes his captain as a "frantic old man" whose hysteria reflects a peculiarly "sneering triumph" (557); and where Starbuck toys with the idea of mutiny in "The Musket," he draws on the phrase rather condescendingly to reflect his vexation with Ahab, asking in paralysis: "shall this crazed old

man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship's company down to doom with him? (571). Even when he does manage to speak directly to Ahab, replacing his derogatory "old man" with an awfully respectful "Oh, my Captain! my Captain" (604), Starbuck is hardly capable of preoccupying Ahab's mind until the end of the paragraph—let alone the end of the narrative the way Fedallah does even posthumously.

The unsurpassed intimacy, patience, and sombre warmth of the direct address in "Take another pledge, old man" makes Fedallah's sentence even more unique and brewing with potentials. Not only has Fedallah confronted Ahab with the atrocious consequence of his actions through prophecies and outright warnings, he also enjoys an utterly unique emotional tie with Ahab, best encapsulated in the chummy address "old man," that enables him to speak as the captain's equal, pleading with his Highness, however in vain, to change course. This peculiar and surprisingly unique ability to intimately address and ultimately warn Ahab also enables Fedallah to smile back at rigid stereotypes of his image as emotionally numb. Only a single page after the "pledge" scene with Ahab, Ishmael reports that Fedallah's "wild face was," as it always has been, "subdued to an unearthly passionlessness" (556). Yet by the end of "The Whale Watch," Fedallah has demonstrated the ability not only to act and speak, but also to feel and care.

Having patiently walked his arrogant friend through the conversation, Fedallah finally comes to realize that Ahab is at a point of no return. Insisting to believe, in utmost paranoia, that he is "Immortal on land and on sea," Ahab even rebuffs the possibility that "Hemp only can kill thee" (*MD* 555). At this point, Fedallah's one last response is a mournful expression of silence as "his eyes lighted up like fire-flies in the gloom" (*ibid*). This emotionally charged finale provides a fitting description by which to remember Fedallah, since despite his despair and against hostile narrative odds, he has been able to articulate his stance through an effervescence ("fire-flies") of genuine feelings ("in the gloom"). Concerned about the *Pequod's* fate, Fedallah is a voice of sanity arguing with his "old

man" to retreat from destructive vows. It no longer matters that Ahab dismisses Fedallah's warning or advice "with a laugh of derision" (ibid). Nor is it important that Ishmael's dehumanizing lens continues to project Fedallah's "sunken eyes" as filled with "death-glimmer" while "a hideous motion gnawed his mouth" to eternal silence (608-9). There is, in truth, more to Fedallah than meets the eye, and even more to him than catches the ear. By a leap of critical imagination, we might even imagine an alternative "proleptic narrative" opening to *Moby-Dick*: "Call me Fedallah."

The vortex of Fedallah's sentence – "Take another pledge, old man" – uttered in defiance, leads to a radical revision in our understanding of the character as a self-sacrificial prophet of doom. Taken either as the cause of Ahab's moral depravity, or simply dismissed as too irrelevant, Fedallah has often been demonized within and beyond the narrative as the prototype of an "all-encompassing East" (Leroux 425). However, what Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" articulates against the grain of his "minorness" provides an alternative to view the novel from an angle unexplored by generations of readers and critics ranging from traditional Orientalists like Dorothee Finkelstein to progressive Marxists like Franco Moretti. Furthermore, with regard to twentieth-century Americanists of the Cold War, who flatly projected the novel as an aesthetic site for the liberal anti-communist consensus, Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" is capable, on behalf of C. L. R. James and his *Renegades and Castaways* from Ellis Island to Tehran, to cry out "Take another pledge, old man." This is humorously the case in light of the 1954 amendment to the Pledge of Allegiance, as the US Congress passed "the bill to insert 'under God'" into the national Pledge, hoping that "the addition would underscore the difference between our system and 'Godless communism'" (Jones & Meyer 11). Going so far as to "transform" Ellis Island "into a scene of social death" (Pease "NS" 35), or turn the Iranian capital into a Cold War buffer zone (Kinzer 4), the revised Pledge of Allegiance must have deserved, as it still does, an apt response such as Fedallah's "Take another pledge."



Drawing upon what Peggy Phelan terms a “supplemental excess” of meaning underlying all representations to make “multiple and resistant readings possible” (2), I cannot help but push Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” into *terra incognita*. The dark complexioned figure wearing a white turban and a Chinese jacket might simply be a mystery wrapped in an enigma, a mere hallucination of Melville’s Orientalist nightmares. To me, though, he has proven to be a Perso-Arabic traveller in Indo-Chinese attire going so far as the Americas to join the *Pequod* in an adventure. During a fateful journey as such, Fedallah has heroically evaded, in his cross-cultural and trans-temporal disposition, both the dehumanizing effects of Ishmael’s immediate context in the nineteenth-century, as well as the imperial hankerings of twentieth-century critics from the Cold War to the epoch of World Literature. Fedallah has thus raised his voice in defiance against tides of Ahab’s destructive will, as well as Ishmael’s self-serving narrative of survival, urging both to “Take another pledge.” In all its simplicity, the sentence is both a plea for Ahab’s return to Nantucket, and a response to all misreadings that reduce the Parsee’s vision into the ill omen prophesying the *Pequod*’s destruction. Yet above all, at his most subversive, Fedallah’s is a statement that strikes back at a chain of misleading binaries within and beyond Ishmael’s narrative that separate the West from the Rest, and a castaway from another.

### Chapter Summary

In a timely op-ed in *The Guardian* less than a week after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> in 2001, Edward Said made a passing reference to Ahab’s “pursuit of Moby Dick” to foresee the United States’ most likely response to an already de-historicized foe, the Muslim world: “Manichaeian symbols and apocalyptic scenarios are bandied about with future consequences and rhetorical restraint thrown to the winds.” As Said warned against the potential retaliation, à la Ahab, of “an imperial power injured at home,” he earnestly summoned critical observers to be wary of such “inadequate” but

rigidly solidified divides between “Islam” and “the West,” which were bound to lead to an atrocious War on Terror in the years to follow. Though poignantly spot-on and prophetically calling, missing in Said’s rather simplifying application of *Moby-Dick* was Fedallah, Melville’s one representative from West Asia, and a woeful figure whom we heard pleading with Ahab to return ashore and “Take another pledge” (MD 555). A reference to Fedallah and his potential to defy Ahab’s obstinate resolve could have empowered the pertinence of Said’s already prompt response to George W. Bush’s forthcoming crusade.

Opening this chapter with an epitaph from the Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu’s “Lost Poem,” I have suggested that with Fedallah at the epicentre of a subversive reading of *Moby-Dick*, an untold story would come to the fore to inscribe the significance of the novel in our open-ended present. A national literary treasure since the period of “Melville Revival” in the 1920s, *Moby-Dick* has over the course of the twentieth-century evolved into a canonized masterpiece, and has never failed to address critical issues concerning the United States’ socio-political scene vis-à-vis the world at large. For instance, a brand of Melville scholarship entailed the epoch of liberal anti-communist consensus undergirding American Studies during the Cold War, when Melville’s work was for the likes of F. O. Matthiessen and Richard Chase a site of symbolic struggle between an Ishmaelite America and an Ahabesque state of communist aggression. Concurrently, there was also the backlash of dissident voices such as C. L. R. James against the “frame narrative” of the Cold War, who in 1952 deployed *Moby-Dick* as a literary dwelling for oppressed *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* such as himself. Furthermore, towards the end of the twentieth-century, there was, as it remains, the realm of World Literature wherein Franco Moretti, for one, has viewed Melville’s work as a “world text” securing the global dominance of the West (and its literary traditions) over the Rest (and their peripheral literary products). Finally, as the above reference illustrated, there have also been responses by the likes of Edward Said, Rashid Khalidi, and Dennis Donoghue that have to various extents revealed the capacity of *Moby-Dick* to

emerge as a “revenge play” in the aftermath of the neoconservative War on Terror in the twenty-first century (Donoghue 164, Khalidi 93).

Unexamined in almost all the studies noted above has been the “proleptic narrative” of Melville’s isolatoes in general and Fedallah in particular. Termed following C. L. R. James’s penchant for untold stories, and Donald Pease’s lead to anticipate them, I have defined a “proleptic narrative” as a prospective search for a new account of Melville’s Parsee that could potentially unearth new layers of signification against the grain of *Moby-Dick* as a Cold War allegory nationally conceived, or a “world text” globally writ large. Fedallah, normatively seen as a stereotype of silence and deception at the far left of an “East-West” dichotomy underlying readings of the novel over the past century, has in this chapter been a “minor character” whose voice I retrieved in an effort to talk back to both Ishmael’s self-aggrandizing narrative of survival, as well as Ahab’s monomaniacal pledge to self-destruct. As such, Fedallah’s newly attained agency to defy the totalizing perspectives of Ahab and Ishmael prevalent throughout Melville criticism will help to reimagine *Moby-Dick* neither at the epistemic core of an unequal “world literary system,” nor as a political allegory to only externalize the merits (Chase, Matthiessen) or hazards (C. L. R. James, Said) of US hegemony throughout the globe. Borrowing Alex Woloch’s words on the significance of subordinate characters in literature, Fedallah “enfolds the untold tale into the telling” (42), and emancipates *Moby-Dick* from the delimiting perspectives that deny the full actualization of a character who could change the course of the *Pequod*’s voyage.

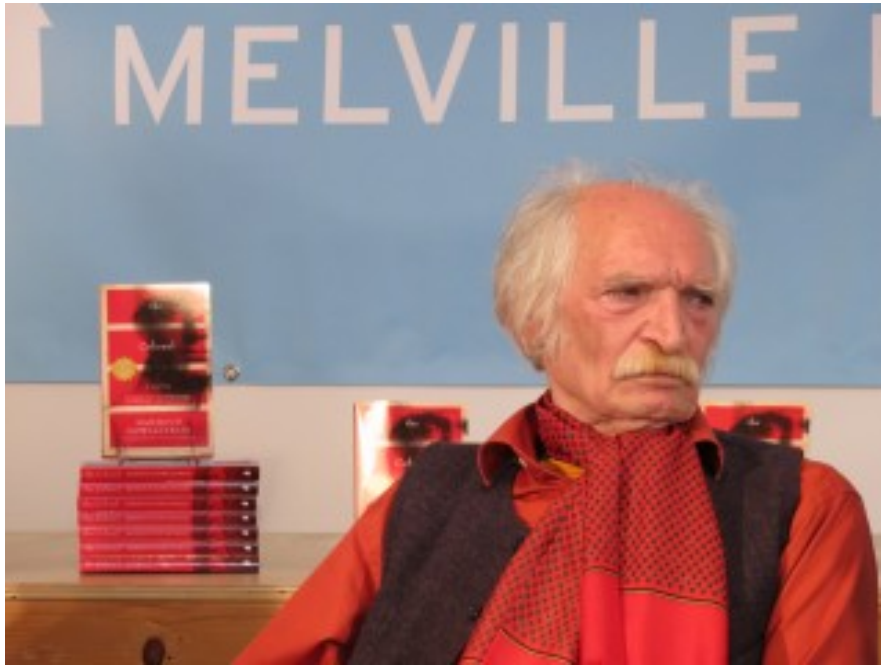


Figure 4. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi paying homage to *Moby-Dick*, courtesy of Melville House

Turning now to the next two chapters on contemporary Iranian fiction to explore the comparative implications of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," I finally close this chapter *not* recollecting world historical conflicts ranging from the Cold War to the War on Terror as I so far have following C. L. R. James and Edward Said, but recalling a literary event in New York, Melville's hometown and final resting place. In May 2012, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, the eminent Iranian novelist whose *Missing Soluch* is the focus of my fourth chapter, sat down in the Brooklyn office of Melville House for a talk upon the publication of the English translation of his *The Colonel* in the United States. Following a lively discussion that proved indicative of what Hamid Dabashi, his interlocutor that evening, calls the "cosmopolitan worldliness" of Persian literary humanism (PLH 40), Dowlatabadi closed the discussion with an insightful note on his own creative imagination: "Without intuition creative writing is an arduous task. For me, it resembles the life of a whale; sunk in the ocean [contemplating amidst the daily routines], before rising up to the surface to spout sparks of imagination—[a metaphor] as a homage to Melville!" (Figure 4).

Here is a simple but dazzling exchange in literary humanism between Dowlatabadi and Melville that, not unlike Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," transcends in a trans-temporal and cross-cultural disposition all national or postcolonial boundaries, and misleading binaries that separate one literary world from another, and give one hegemonic legitimacy while banishing the other to the neo-imperial edges of World Literature. Moreover, in constructing an imaginary bridge between two literary traditions intimately connected to the wider world, Dowlatabadi's closing remarks speak volumes on behalf of the length and depth of Fedallah's silence in *Moby-Dick*, since in the Iranian author's worldly recognition of Melville (and vice versa I dare imagine), we find a present-day Parsee. If, as Ishmael comically speculates, "the White Whale, spending his vacation in seas far remote from his periodical feeding-grounds, should turn up his wrinkled brow off the Persian Gulf" (*MD* 236) as Melville's subversive imagination did, so can Fedallah find his way to America. In no case should the "WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE" Parsee—or "ONE ISHMAEL" for that matter—be encircled by or delimited to any one "*Grand Contested Election*" or "BLOODY BATTLE" through drones or economic sanctions, whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere (29).

### Chapter 3

#### Call Him Javid: Limning Iranian Manhood in *The Story of Javid*

"I am in this prison guilty of being a man; oh Love;  
Call me a rogue if I am convicted of anything but."

Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, "This Autumn in Prison"

#### Relocating a Proleptic Narrative

"Call me Fedallah," we heard the Parsee say in the previous chapter, addressing a reading of *Moby-Dick* against the current of both the narrative and the scholarship it has sustained since the twentieth-century. Within the boundaries of Melville's text, I have maintained that Fedallah is neither an "evil shadow" in Starbuck's words, nor a "muffled mystery to the last" as Ishmael chooses to believe (*MD* 624, 270). Rather, he is a silenced isolato with an untold story sunk with the *Pequod* down the Pacific. What is more, by questioning interpretations of *Moby-Dick* during (though not limited to) the Cold War, it is apparent that most critics have all too easily conformed to align Fedallah with an "all encompassing 'East'" that haunts America's political imagination (Leroux 425). In Franco Moretti's misreading, for instance, which passes by Fedallah as an "insignificant" Mephistopheles, *Moby-Dick* is constituted as a canonical "world text" that maps out, geographically then historically, "the universal dominion of the West" over the Rest (*ME* 33–34). As I clarified at great length, of course, there is more *significance* to Fedallah than a passive incarnation of Evil. Our harpooner is not so much a stereotype of silence and deception as a voice of sanity pleading with Ahab, against long odds, to not chase the White Whale so destructively around the globe. Summed up in his life-affirming cry to his captain, "Take another pledge, old man" (*MD* 555), Fedallah's tall tale bears within it the seeds of a "proleptic narrative" yet to materialize.

But what is the advantage of arriving at a "proleptic narrative" in light of my general concern with conceptions of World Literature from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*? In the first chapter, an anecdotal recital of the

American text against the backdrop of Operation AJAX on a summer day in 1953 Tehran conjured up sceptres of Kermit Roosevelt (as Ishmaelite America opposing Ahabesque imperialism) and Iranian men and women (Fedallah incarnates) witnessing history unfold before them. But in the attempt to push more boundaries, I further proposed that there must be a way to read *Moby-Dick* beyond such traumatic confrontations as the Cold War or, by extension, the War on Terror that not only characterize US foreign policy in the Muslim world but also inform the literary scholarship that has perpetuated Fedallah's silence against the subversive grain of Melville's work. *Moby-Dick* is no doubt a polysemous allegory, and in Fedallah's defiance lays a further layer of signification that makes it possible to deconstruct the novel's establishment as an imperial "world text." With Fedallah at a new epicentre of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, I chose to close the previous chapter *not* recalling the unsettling summer of 1953 but rather half a century later in Brooklyn's Melville House where Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, whose work along with Esmail Fassih's is the focus in the coming pages, sat down to read from his new novel. Indulging in a trans-temporal exchange of literary wisdom with Melville, his American host one might say, Dowlatabadi echoed the first resonance of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" beyond the Canon and confines of American literature.

Dowlatabadi's appearance in Melville's hometown all the way from Tehran has first and foremost made it possible for the observer to cut across the paralyzing divide between "Islam" and "the West," which is historically fostered between Iran and the United States (Said *CI* xii-xv). More importantly, Dowlatabadi's imaginary encounter with Melville surpasses, within a broader comparative framework, such neo-imperial divisions between cores and peripheries that often constitute the fabric of world literary poetics. It helps to remember from the first chapter that the "world republic of letters" (Casanova's term) and its constitutional "literary system" (propagated by Moretti) is no more than the apparatus that governs the production, circulation, and curricular positioning of countless texts that are Eurocentrically weaved as World Literature. Thus to disallow, even on the

microscopic and admittedly limited focus of my thesis, the inequalities inherent to the “world literary system” is to imagine new ways of aligning *Moby-Dick* with *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* not as “world” but “worldly literatures”: Following Hamid Dabashi (and Edward Said before him), I have been referring to “worldly literatures” as artistic traditions—in our case, American literature and Persian *Adab*—that are organically conceived in their circumstantial realities in sync with “the worlds that enabled” each to materialize (PLH 163, 220–222). As such, there is no longer room for Moretti’s postulate that reduces the depth and breadth of Fedallah’s vision to a mere state of “insignifican[ce]”—with destructive implications for the multiplicity of worldly texts that could in fact read through the Parsee’s vision.

The comparative capacity of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” lies in the possibility that in reflecting voices of two counterparts, Fassih’s Javid (in this chapter) and Dowlatabadi’s Mergan (in the next), three novels come together unbound by the universally all-encompassing but non-homogeneous “category of literature.” According to Aamir Mufti, as the concept of “literature” reproduces itself in the Goethean frame of *Weltliteratur*, “global relations of force” are put into play to hide and conceal world historic cultural phenomena such as *Adab* in the Persian speaking world or *Sahitya* in the Indian subcontinent (319). Yet in this and the following chapter, the resonance of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative,” which I retrace in two works of contemporary Iranian fiction, is not informed by any reductive notion of “literature” that could impair a full appreciation of the locally embedded literary event. Thus the attempt to rethink and recast the idea of World Literature, as laid out in my methodology, ought to be liberated “from the effects of standardization” that homogenize varied and variegated cultures and literary traditions under the rubric of “diversity” (339). What Mufti proposes as “better close reading”—that is “attentive to the worldliness of language and text”—is methodologically pathbreaking to the comparative criticism that follows (*ibid*).



Seeking entrance to what Hamid Dabashi translates as “the world of Persian literary humanism” (*Adab-i Farsi* or “Persian *Adab*” as cited in my thesis), Fedallah finally arrives at reflections of his image in a Zoroastrian boy from Yazd in central Iran, and a rural woman from the fictional village of Zaminej in southern Khurasan. It is important to bear in mind that the “world” which Dabashi conjures up in his translation of *Adab* is far removed from the Eurocentric construct, which at this point in human history sweeps over our planetary knowledge. I attempted in the first chapter to demonstrate the geographic flaws and epistemic pitfalls of such cartography of the world with the so-called West at its normative centre (Apter 186, Kadir 268). Now, in appreciating the world of Persian *Adab*, I embrace “multiple global maps,” from Melville’s North America to Fassih and Dowlatabadi’s West Asia, as “the *condito sine qua non* of coming to terms with the worldliness of cultural productions domestic to these universes” (Dabashi *PLH* 163). Further on, in examining Javid’s aesthetic stance on discourses of Iranian nationalism, I will duly avoid a flat equation between nationalism registered in Fassih’s work and, say, Fredric Jameson’s “sweeping hypothesis” that “all third world texts” are essentially deemed as “*national allegories*” (69). Preventing one world (that of *Moby-Dick*) from glossing over another’s (that of *The Story of Javid*, *Missing Soluch*, and, ultimately, *The Runner*) is an imperative to my intellectual endeavour. American literature and Persian *Adab* are best understood outside and against the stratifying imaginations of Jameson and world literary proponents who tend to perceive their *worlds* as the “core” against their abstractly conceived “peripheral” Other.

“Call me Fedallah,” said the Parsee as he envisioned a new opening to *Moby-Dick*. In the following, Javid and Mergan will each resonate his “proleptic narrative” in their own terms. In the present chapter, “Call Him Javid,” Fassih’s Zoroastrian protagonist summons Fedallah from within the immediate context of *Moby-Dick* in antebellum America. Both characters are integral to conceptions of national identity imagined in each work. Fedallah, as already noted, goes aesthetically mute to reflect the autonomy of an

American Ishmael as well as the survival of his expansionist narrative. Javid, too, serves an Ishmaelite purpose as the story of his ordeals, predicated on an archetypal conception of Iranian masculinity, helps to externalize Fasih's nationalist concerns at the expense of subduing the female voices in the narrative. In the fourth chapter, "Call Her Mergan," Dowlatabadi's protagonist will engage with Fedallah against the Cold War temporality of *Moby-Dick*. Building on conclusions from the second chapter, namely that Fedallah is an outcast of defiant disposition as opposed to the Orientalist fantasies of Melville's mid-century critics, I will argue that Mergan is the full embodiment of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." Perhaps one of the most articulate male-authored representations of femininity in Persian fiction, Mergan does singlehandedly resist the interlocking politics of patriarchy at the local level, national policies of land reform imposed from above, and global politics of the Cold War predominating the Iranian scene during the 1960s.

In the comparative analysis that unfolds over the tripartite moments of *Moby-Dick*—from the nineteenth-century to the Cold War to our open-ended present—I revisit the broad notion of World Literature from a fresh angle, a vantage point from which the ideological construction of the West is neither the core of the "world literary system" nor the epicentre of the Euro-American conception of literature. In the cross-cultural and trans-temporal dialogue that follows, "the world map" of the *Pequod's* journey from Nantucket to Yazd, Tehran, and finally Zaminej gives precedence to "local geographies," and values "the polylocality of our historical exigencies" (Dabashi *PO* 145). For instance, it is evident that conceptions of gender, race, and national identity have promptly informed literary expression in antebellum America and revolutionary Iran. Nonetheless, texts are so "enmeshed in circumstances," and hence "worldly," that they can transcend the fabric of time and space to address issues far beyond their authors' intentions (Said "WTC" 263). The case of the Cold War and America's fateful presence in the Persian Gulf region are interesting examples that interweave in pathbreaking ways fates of three characters whose conversation may

bridge the much-embattled divide between two cultural spheres. Thus, the new map of the *Pequod's* journey embraces “the polyvocality of our voices,” and appreciates “the polyfocality of our visions” (Dabashi *PO* 145). And as such, reflecting Javid and Mergan’s images through Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” serves a greater purpose. It helps to articulate voices of agential men and women, namely in Iran but also in America, who have withstood and spoken up in defiance against—in a Melvillean doubloon—the wreck of the *Pequod*, and the subsequent wars for *spermaceti* and *oil* since Operation AJAX.

### Outward Sea, Inward Land

The stretch of earth that creatively links Fedallah to Javid and Mergan is the Iranian plateau; and by that I am not referring only to the geological formation in Western and Central Asia expanding towards the Parsees of Gujarat. In fact, it is the very idea of “land” that opens the wormhole between separated regions of space-time from antebellum America (1851) to revolutionary Iran (1979–81). At a certain point in *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael is imagining the whereabouts of Ahab’s game, it occurs to him that “the White Whale, spending his vacation in seas far remote from his periodical feeding-grounds, should turn up his wrinkled brow off the Persian Gulf” (*MD* 236; Figure 1). Just north of Ishmael’s imagined location is “Persia” or present-day Iran.

This, of course, is the closest Ishmael ever gets to my geographic point of reference. Yet there are ways, beyond the immediate textuality of *Moby-Dick*, to navigate “feeding-grounds” for comparative analysis. Consider, for instance, Ishmael’s urge at the outset of his narrative to “set his feet a-going” and take to the *sea*, convinced that “meditation and water are wedded for ever” (*MD* 26). Then take, in contrast, kindred preoccupations of Javid and Mergan in two drastically different contexts—of urban and rural backgrounds—with *land*. Javid’s affectionate bond to “*khak-i garm-i dasht-i Iran*” [the warm soil of the plains of Iran] (*SJ* 7) is only superseded by

Mergan's consuming attachment to "*Khuda Zamin*" [God's Land] (JS 109). On top of this analogy between sea and land, there is also the *outward* course of Ishmael's voyage that stands in contrast to the *inward* disposition of Javid and Mergan vis-à-vis their environments. To extend the analogy into a statement on Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," we can juxtapose the seaward expansionism of the *Pequod* in its search for natural resources in *Moby-Dick* against the landed rootedness of the protagonists in *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch*. Nationally recapped, Ishmael (and Fedallah, in his silence), Javid, and Mergan frame different stories about America and Iran.



Figure 1. "Map of Persia" (1886), British Library

Critics have rightly pointed out the importance of the ideology of "Manifest Destiny" – first coined by John L. O'Sullivan in 1845 as the embodiment of "all the hopes and expectations of expansionists" in antebellum America

(Mountjoy 10)—to the creative birth of the White Whale. Exploring “the meaning and fate of such a project,” Paul Rogin argues that Melville dealt with the issue in *Moby-Dick*, a novel that happens to share “the initials of O’Sullivan’s Manifest Destiny” (101). Gifra-Adroher, moreover, takes the novel to have addressed such “commercial expansionist enterprises” as “whaling in the Pacific” (33). In fact, in his effort to externalize “American expansionism promulgated by Manifest Destiny,” Melville has called into question the “exploitation of other people’s natural resources” that have been sanctioned in the process (ibid). Interestingly enough, whereas Manifest Destiny has been long out-dated as a nationalist ideology, its spirit seems to have lived on through the majority of US interventions since the Second World War. The geopolitical map of America’s current involvement in parts of West Asia now Eurocentrically called “the Middle East” is a revealing example (Figure 2).

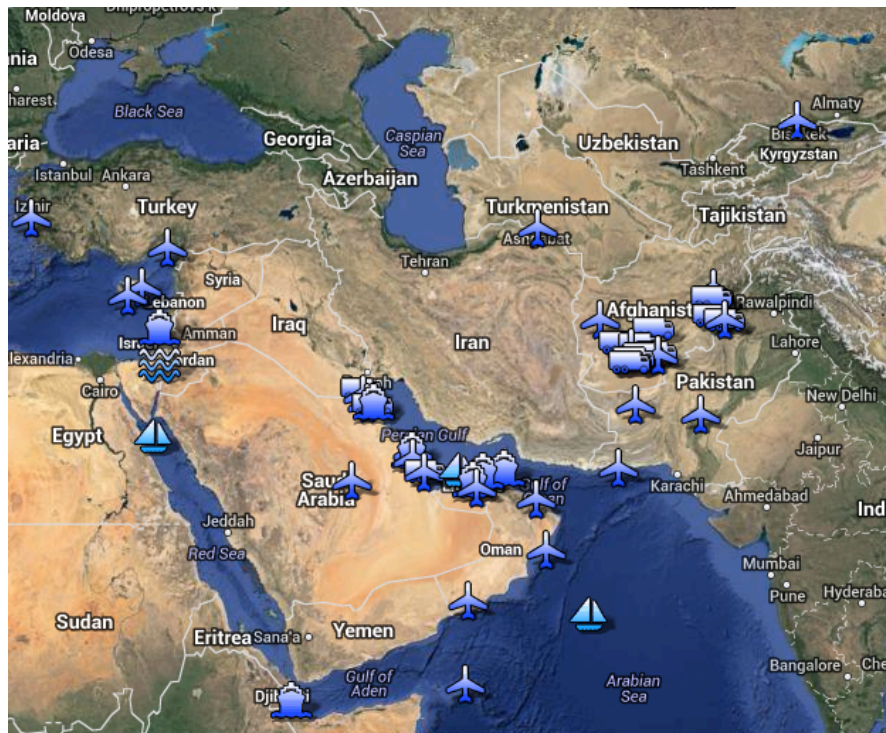


Figure 2. United States’ military bases encircling Iran, Aljazeera (Piven)

Compared with the Iranian experience, in addition, there is a further twist to the story of Manifest Destiny. As I have suggested, Javid and Mergan’s

*inward* preoccupations with land counter Ishmael's *outward* journey to the sea. In order to make sense of this breach, it helps to rethink America's destiny, as it were, through Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's study of early nationalism in Iran. In a comparative approach to nationalism in late Qajar Iran (1785–1925) in light of the American frontier hankerings, Kashani-Sabet states that although "America had successfully stretched its borders 'from sea to shining sea,'" quoting and extending Jackson Turner's phrase, "Iran had humbly watched its frontiers narrow from [Persian] gulf to tenebrous [Caspian] sea" (102). What is more, unlike America that "articulated its frontier vision in a pithy proportion" almost as expressive as *Moby-Dick* itself, "Qajar Iran [that is, the cradle of early Iranian nationalism] failed to produce a Turnerian thesis to frame its frontier experience" (ibid). Nevertheless, as Kashani-Sabet continues to demonstrate with revealing implications in contemporary Iran, "the preoccupation with *land* and *borders* profoundly affected Iranian politics even if this phenomenon did not generate an official doctrine" – such as Monroe's in the US (ibid). In short, as I shall also illustrate through works by Fassih and Dowlatabadi, "Iranians attached new connotations to the territorial space to which they belonged and popularized political allegories that encapsulated their frontier drama" (ibid).

It is now possible to revisit the difference between Melville's seafaring account of America and the landed renditions of Iran by Fassih and Dowlatabadi as a creative conflict to shed light on Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." At the core of the argument in the previous chapter was the notion that Ishmael's establishment as a participant observer throughout his narrative is contingent upon Fedallah's lack of an articulate voice. In other words, as best evident in "Leg and Arm," Ishmael's narrative of survival beginning afloat Queequeg's coffin at the expense of Fedallah's demise, finally coming full circle—back in America—to the opening line "Call me Ishmael," is at least in part made possible by way of keeping Fedallah's "narrative" at bay. Reducing him to an "unearthly voice" and a threat to "the blessed light of the evangelical land" (*MD* 261, 271), Ishmael silences

Fedallah's version of *Moby-Dick* in good order to articulate that of his own. However, as concluded, Fedallah does in one particular occasion gesture at his own version of truth—in pleading with Ahab to “Take another pledge” (555)—and thus attempts to subvert Ishmael's rhetorical move at the outset of the novel.

On a much broader scope, I thereby propose, juxtaposing *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* with *Moby-Dick* is an attempt to recite a “proleptic narrative” rooted in Persian *Adab*, a literary tradition falsely taken to sit as World Literature at the periphery of Melville's “world text.” Therefore, landed preoccupations of Fassih and Dowlatabadi vis-à-vis the seaward expansion of *Moby-Dick* onto textual and scholarly levels are manifestations of Fedallah's “narrative” lost down the Pacific. Simply put, from its antebellum birth as an expansive contemplation on Manifest Destiny to its later canonization during the epoch of “liberal anti-communist consensus” underlying American Studies (Pease “NA” 7), *Moby-Dick* has been read in the spirit of the imperial will to occupy buffer zones such as Iran during the Cold War. Bearing that in mind, works by Fassih and Dowlatabadi are exemplars of literary fiction following the fateful events of August 1953 (Mir-Abidini 408) that reach out to the textual and paratextual world of *Moby-Dick* in order to write back. As such, in countering the seaward expansionism of the *Pequod* with inward perceptions of land, Javid and, to a greater extent, Mergan read as embodiments of “an aesthetic will to resist power” chief to the fabric of Persian *Adab* and definitive to its historical development (Dabashi *PLH* 190).

Before going any further, we must beware that if the two Iranian novels under scrutiny here seem informed, as they are, by discourses of nationalism in their cultural contexts, they do not in any way corroborate Frederic Jameson's category of “national allegories” theorized in his meditation on World Literature. For Jameson, as with most world literary scholars, literatures outside the purview of Euro-American aesthetic standards are implacably easy to compartmentalize as ancient relics in a



museum. As it happened, in closing years of the Cold War, Jameson introduced his “sweeping hypothesis” that the entirety of “third-world texts” are intrinsically “allegorical” and, more specifically, “*national allegories*” (69). In fairness, Jameson initially points out in his controversial essay that the polemical term “third world” will inevitably gloss over the “profound differences between a whole range of non-western countries and situations.” But for the sake of argument, he then declares, one must use the term “in an essentially descriptive sense” (67). By doing so, interestingly enough, Jameson admits to being *theoretically* conscious but *practically* ignorant of the inequalities taken for granted in an understanding of the world and the diverse literary traditions it breeds in hierarchical terms. The devil is in the detail, and the very usage of neo-imperial designations, with “the West” at the centre of their normative geographies, is highly problematic. Aijaz Ahmad has challenged Jameson’s postulate by rejecting the notion that a “third-world literature” could ever exist “as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge” (4). Thus the effort, such as Jameson’s, to hide and conceal the complexity of world literatures around the globe under a single monolith is positively reductionist and epistemologically impossible (4–5). If anything, Ahmad concludes, the theory of “*national allegories*” only “freezes and de-historicises the global space” as trapped between its two or more opposing poles (11).

More pertinent to my present focus on Fassih and Dowlatabadi is Hamid Dabashi’s more recent critique of Jameson’s “hypothesis” as a blanket rejection of the “historical depth and longevity, geographical expanse, and moral imagination” of Persian literary humanism (PLH 261). The audacity to reframe diverse literary traditions—say, in Persianate societies throughout Western and Central Asia—as “*national allegories*” stems from a “universal will to knowledge” that is only capable of viewing “one (imperial world)” to identify its “self-serving, self-firsting” subject (252–4). Consider, for instance, the case of Fassih who has limned a masculine trope of nationalism in his protagonist Javid (literally meaning: “eternal” and “enduring”). The literary production at hand, seen through Jameson’s lens,



may perhaps go along with Jameson's assertion that "the story of the private individual [say, that of Javid] is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture [presumably, 1920s Iran re-imagined in 1981]" (69). However, there is a world of difference between the public space of Fassih's Javid pregnant with implications on the one hand, and the "embattled situation" of Jameson's "public third-world culture" on the other. Whereas Jameson's is a floating signifier that signifies no concrete reality, the public space of Fassih's Tehran is a highly complex aesthetic construct, informed at once by the tumultuous period of 1920s in which the novel is set, as well as gendered discourses of nationalism that are materialized through a distinctly Iranian representation of masculinity.

*The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* are no doubt descendants of national literature in contemporary Iran, and specifically concerned with the nation's *land* as I have suggested. But "national literatures," needless to say, are not residues of Jameson's conjectures on World Literature; rather, they are "sites of contestation between defeated (but defiant) imperial domains" throughout the history of Persian *Adab*, "dominant imperial hegemonies" from European to Soviet to American imperialisms, "and above all the public space" of *vatan* [homeland] "they have managed to create and craft" (Dabashi *PLH* 225). Summed up in another Melvillean doubloon, the following reading of Javid as a national trope dissents from Jameson's potential interpretation of the novel as a "national allegory" just as my revival of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" repudiated Ishmael's demoralizing assertion that the Parsee is essentially a "muffled mystery" and nothing more (*MD* 270).

### **From Fedallah to Javid: An Original Iranian Manhood**

At the core of my analysis of *The Story of Javid* is the construction of the protagonist, the title character, as a national trope in 1920s Iran, who is entangled in an archetypal conception of gender and masculinity to highlight his Iranianness. The early twentieth-century nationalist discourse

in Iran reviled the deficiencies of the ruling Qajar dynasty (1785–1925) and mournfully lauded, in turn, a discourse of masculinity that assumed moral responsibility to protect the “geobody” of Iran (de Groot 144, Najmabadi 98). Revisiting and appropriating this period in 1981, Fasih has represented a Zoroastrian boy, an emblem of pre-Islamic Iran revered by a strand of Iranian patriots, in order to channel his own nationalist concerns through an idealized image of masculinity. What is interesting here is that Javid and Fedallah, as literary representations creatively invested in ancient Iran but originated in different literary traditions, may in fact dovetail to shed light on Fasih’s gendered engagement with Zoroastrianism in his historical novel. The idea, in short, is that Javid’s characterization as a markedly *pre-Islamic* figure in contemporary Iran is very much informed by an attitude prevalent amongst Iranian nationalists that was in part rooted in European Orientalist scholarship on ancient Iran. Significantly, Melville’s penchant for Zoroastrianism, too, departed from the very point of origin, this time further west to North America where it merged into the fascination of the American Renaissance writers with Asian religions. Granted, Javid has developed into the highly problematic exemplar of what I term an “original Iranian manhood,” while Fedallah has become the equally problematic Oriental foil to highlight Ishmael’s Americanness.

It may be that Melville came up with the idea of Fedallah in works such as *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89) by the English historian Edward Gibbon who wrote extensively on Zoroastrians (Isani “Fire Symbolism” 386). Another credible source is the Oriental romance *Lalla Rookh* by the Irish poet Thomas Moore, which Isani believes must have made Melville first realize “the literary potential in the religious orthodoxy of Zoroastrians” (“Naming of Fedallah” 382). Needless to say, Melville’s general attitude towards Fedallah, as noted in Timothy Marr’s *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, is Orientalist in essence and reductive in treatment. In the broader frame of American Transcendentalism, moreover, it is notable that world religions were a constant source of inspiration. In the process that Arthur Versluis terms “intellectual colonialism,”

Transcendentalists in their Unitarian quest for “a new Reformation” opted to incorporate “[t]he best of the past and of all the world’s religions” towards an ambitiously “new American literary religion” (5, 10). From Emerson to Hawthorne, American writers drew upon knowledge “divorced from the cultures to which they belonged,” and attempted—emulating their Orientalist counterparts in Europe—“to take from the world religions what suited them” (5). As for Melville, who after all opposed Transcendentalist efforts to gain a new key to all mythologies through Asian religions, Versluis makes note of a penchant for Gnosticism constantly revalidated by a highly pessimistic application of Orientalist knowledge (122–23). Inevitably, thus, Melville’s was an even *more* “generalized” understanding than that of his contemporaries in representing “Asian characters or images to reinforce his essentially pessimistic worldview” (124). One needs only think of Fedallah—regardless of the “proleptic narrative” in my subversive reading—to confirm Versluis’s claims. To reiterate, Melville and the American Renaissance literati in general digested their knowledge of Asia through the intermediary hands of Orientalist counterparts in Europe. Even Melville’s personal encounter with an actual Parsee must have occurred not in America but during a trip to mid-century England where Indian Zoroastrians frequented for trade (Isani “Fire Symbolism” 386).

Yet on the scholarly front, which concerns the focus here, Zoroaster was a presence in European thought from the Middle Ages as a figure associated with “the cult of fire and, worst of all, magic” (Stausberg). Such misconceptions continued to persist almost intact through the Renaissance as well as the early phases of Orientalism when “Islamic stereotypes,” too, “came to be mixed with European traditions” (ibid). With the eighteenth-century emergence of Thomas Hyde’s *Religionis Veterum Persarum*, Zoroaster was reintroduced by the English historian as a religious reformer established in the history of Abrahamic traditions (ibid). Morphing gradually into a “key figure in Enlightenment discourse,” Zoroaster then appeared in works ranging from Voltaire’s letters to Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (ibid). Thenceforth, according to Ali Ansari, “‘Zoroastrianism’ became one means

by which Western intellectuals sought to encourage secularism by showing how ‘unoriginal’ Christian (and to a lesser extent Judaic’ belief was” (15). Thus, as the nineteenth-century wore on, “Zoroastrianism” and – much more problematically – “Aryanism” (to which will I return) “became heavily mythologized,” “reinterpreted,” and “rationalized” before culminating in “a philosophical renaissance” through Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (ibid). Eventually, it was in its nineteenth-century form in European thought that discursive Zoroastrianism travelled to two cultural spheres. Further west, it joined the Unitarian quest of American Transcendentalists for religious reform and, more subversively, led to Melville’s birth to Fedallah. Further east, Zoroastrianism returned to its birthplace of Iran in the nineteenth-century to fatefully shape the psyche of Iranian nationalists and the emerging literati.

As far the *pre-Islamic* aspect of Zoroastrianism is concerned, the epistemic exchange between European Orientalism and Iranian nationalist discourse is a revealing encounter. The simple idea that Javid, a Zoroastrian boy, should stand in Fassih’s mind as the exemplar of innocence and impeccable Iranianness is the outcome of this encounter yet enduring, much problematically, in present-day Iran. Since the first half of the nineteenth-century, the ruling Qajar monarchs, the presiding religious elite, as well as the urban intelligentsia faced an “intellectual crisis” that Europe was now the superior continent – “militarily, economically, socially” – and that Iran itself was “a *de facto* buffer state in the strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, later called ‘The Great Game’” (Zia-Ebrahimi “Emissary of Golden Age” 379). As a result, the old narrative of Persian supremacy predicated on an “antiquated Islamic self-righteousness” and “a more specifically Iranian sense of cultural superiority” was now in jeopardy (ibid). Thus confronting the spectre of colonial modernity, responses amongst Iranians were and remain varied and variegated. Here I am focusing on one particular and highly ironic reaction that looked back at the history of ancient Iran, and founded its argument on what Reza Zia-Ebrahimi aptly calls “archaism” (ibid).

The story of “archaism” in Iran begins, like that of Fedallah, in Europe where the Orientalists were fallaciously rewriting the history of the world. For instance, renowned historian George Rawlinson argued with arrogant certainty that ethnology “regards it as morally certain, as proved beyond all reasonable doubt, that the chief races of modern Europe, the Celts, the Germans, the Graeco-Italians and the Slavs, had a common origin with the principal race of Western Asia, the Indo-Persian” (qtd. in Zia-Ebrahimi “Self-Orientalization” 499). Along similar lines, Sir William Jones, who was deeply engaged with the so-called Indo-European philology, had also argued that he was “‘absolutely certain’ that Iran was the post-Diluvian centre from where the ‘whole race of man proceeded’” (qtd. in Ansari 13). What then horrendously self-mutated into “the myth of Aryanism” with atrocious consequences during the Second World War was generated at least in part through Orientalist misconceptions of Asian history. “The Aryan myth,” spanning from early nineteenth-century Europe until after the fall of Nazi Germany, “divides humankind into several races, and considers most Europeans, but also Iranians and Indians, as members of the Aryan race” (Zia-Ebrahimi “Self-Orientalization” 447–48).

Sadly, “the Aryan myth” proved appealing to a strand of interested Iranian nationalists although, fortunately, it never blew out of proportion as it did throughout Europe. Iranian’s attraction to discoveries about the history of ancient Persian empires had already taken root through Rawlinson’s series on *Great Oriental Monarchies* on Parthians and Sassanians (1873–1875), pre-Islamic dynasties ruling over Iranian territories. With more scholarship being reproduced on the topic, Iranian intelligentsia began to further appreciate their newly minted lineage of descent historicized in Europe. And given the anxiety of confronting colonial modernity, it so happened that “archaism,” as materialized through “the Aryan myth,” proved tempting for those nationalists for whom the possibility of “kinship” with “fellow Aryans of Europe” could help to “manage the trauma” of first contact (Zia-Ebrahimi “Self-Orientalization” 445–46). For instance, Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani, whose significant body of work goes far beyond the

delimiting boundaries of racist Aryanism, was the first to use the term in identifying “ancient Zoroastrians” with the “‘great Iranian people’ and the ‘noble Aryan nation’” (*Sih Maktub* qtd. in Zia-Ebrahimi “Self-Orientalization” 454).

To sum up, the ideological fabrication of “the Aryan myth,” literary “fascination with Zoroaster,” and scholarly “developments in linguistics and archeology” all had a “more immediate impact on Iranian identity and historical consciousness” than in Europe itself (Ansari 16). Given the influence of Western Europe at the heart of an imperial hemisphere code-named “the West,” the “narrative of Persian history” was destined to shape and inform the Iranians’ appropriation of their own past, so much so that certain Iranian nationalists were hit by the “destructive political myth,” namely, “that Iranians had forgotten their history” until awakened to its European narration (Ansari 17). This renewed pact with a *pre-Islamic* past, which exacerbated anti-Arab sentiments, also marked the bifurcation of Iranian history along “the fault line of ‘Islam’” into a progressive *before* and a backward *after*. Such epistemic exchange with European Orientalism, later evolving into a political ideology undergirding the Pahlavi state apparatus (1925–1979), went very much against the cosmopolitan breadth of a Persian speaking world hospitable to diverse peoples, cultures, and religions from northern Turks to southern Arabs, eastern Baluchi to western Kurds (Dabashi *PI* 22–5). “It is a supreme irony,” Ansari aptly opines, that just

[W]hen Nietzsche spoke of Zarathustra and Wagner considered writing an opera on the story of Rostam [the Persian epic hero of Firdawsi’s *Shahnameh*], Iranians were being told to replace their *myths* and *facts*. That Iranians proved receptive of this historical transplant had much to do with the attractiveness of the history being narrated. (17)

The “attractiveness” of this story does still reverberate through Fassih’s Javid long after the early phases of Iranian nationalism have gone by. At this point, we must beware of the unsettling spectre of Aryanism haunting contemporary Iranian history, since it helps to understand Fassih’s own

biased attitude towards Arabs in his earlier work such as *Sharab-i Kham* [*The Raw Wine*] (1968), a novel centring on a Tehrani woman abducted and driven to suicide by a band of Arab drug dealers in southern Iran. One can also make note of Jalal Aryan himself, the protagonist of Fassih's serialized family saga, whose name is too obviously modelled after the particular reading of ancient Iran discussed above. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that in his later work, Fassih's nostalgic hankerings for pre-Islamic Iran, particularly in *The Story of Javid*, is more nuanced, less ideologically informed, and somewhat stripped of the racist overtones of both his nationalist predecessors and contemporaries. Comparatively put, Fassih's treatment of Javid is more complex than, for instance, the fascination of Mirza Fath'Ali Akhundzadah, the renowned nineteenth-century nationalist, with the Parsee philanthropist Manekji Limji Hataria. During the latter half of the century, Manekji would frequently visit Iran, helping in his role as a public activist "to disseminate neo-Zoroastrian, pre-Islamic-centred, and frankly anti-Arab" sentiments amongst the intelligentsia (Zia-Ebrahimi "Emissary of Golden Age" 377).

In contrast, following Hasan Mir-Abidini's definition of "*new historical novels*" in post-1953 Iran (471–72), I tend to view *The Story of Javid* as a literary production concerned with its historical present in revolutionary Iran (1978–1980), which looks back with a revisionary lens at late Qajar history (1785–1925), with a political unconscious and global awareness spanning all the way back through the Pahlavi period (1925–1979) to its moment of inception in 1981. And this is to say nothing of the novel's preoccupation with Javid's masculinity as an oppressed archetype of gender that can only complicate and problematize the character's establishment as a national trope. Clearly, Fassih's pre-Islamic nostalgia, albeit in need of critical inquiry, is far more cynical and much broader in application than that of his zealously patriotic fellow nationalists. If anything, the moral implications of portraying Javid as a pre-Islamic emblem of impeccable Iranianness is ironically subversive, even explosive, to a Pahlavi state apparatus that fed on the racist "Aryan myth" to begin with. Need I also say,

at this point, that my own reading of the Parsee Fedallah as a literary messenger in a joint study of American literature and Persian *Adab* is even more detached from potentially ideological implications that may link Iranian pre-Islamic history to an egregious and often racist sense of Persian supremacy?

*The Story of Javid*, Fassih's third major novel, is the account of a Zoroastrian Yazdi teenager who travels to Tehran in 1922 in search of his missing family. As it turns out, Javid's father, a travelling merchant who has had regular dealings with the Qajar Prince Malik-Ara, had in his last trip to the capital got into a dispute with the Prince, and been consequently murdered. Unaware of the tragedy at hand, Javid arrives in Tehran and knocks at the palace of his father's slayer. Unsurprisingly, then, Javid becomes a captive in Malik-Ara's household, and finds his mother and little sister perishing in a dungeon. For eight consecutive years, Javid faces nothing but torture and agony inflicted by Malik-Ara and his lackeys, with no one to help and support him except, surprisingly, for Malik-Ara's daughter Suraya, the boy's only sympathetic friend. The *Bildungsroman* of Javid's life, a story of innocence to experience, turns gradually into a revenge tragedy as the protagonist becomes determined to avenge his family's blood, and confront the Qajar Prince. This is why the historical backdrop of the novel becomes significant since the eight-year span of the narrative during the 1920s is signposted by the contestation of Qajar rule and the gradual rise to power of Riza Khan later to be crowned the first Pahlavi Shah of Iran (r. 1925–1941). In fact, as the figure of Riza Khan represented in the narrative arrives to undermine Prince Malik-Ara's authority, it in turn facilitates Javid's revenge towards a resolution. In the end, Javid manages to confront a fugitive Malik-Ara in his own palace, and drown him in the cistern.

Standing at last on the bridge between Fedallah and Javid, a further analogy between Javid and Mazdusht, a contemporary counterpart crafted by the eminent poet Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, can help to finally embed Fassih's novel in its cultural context of revolutionary Iran and, more



importantly, highlight the significance of gender and masculinity to his vision. In the aftermath of the 1953 coup, Akhavan-Sales proclaimed himself a Mazdushti, the imaginative creation of a pre-Islamic faith and a portmanteau composed of “Zoroaster,” the founder of the ancient religion and the reformist “Mazdak,” its Martin Luther. In the poem “This Autumn in Prison,” centering on the persona of Akhavan-Sales in Tehran’s *Zidan-i Qasr* [Palace Prison] in 1966, the poet proclaims that the quasi-Zoroastrian trope of Mazdusht can, if granted the opportunity, deliver the Iranian nation from corruption and tyranny. As Mudarrisi and Ahmadvand have suggested, “incessant political defeats” and loss of hope in freedom from tyranny diverted Akhavan-Sales’s attention “to Iran and its former glory,” a nostalgia rechanneled through an expression of poetic sensibility in the form of Mazdusht, the fictive prophetic figure who signifies the loss of national dignity (47). “*Dar in zindan baray-i khud havay-i digari daram,*”

I have, in this prison, for myself another fantasy;  
Oh world, hark, be mirthless, for I have another joy;  
We are slaves, chained to fears and hopes, yet still  
In the midst of these, I long for another place. (181)

Akhavan-Sales’s utopian hankerings for “another place,” reiterated through matching rhymes, crystalize, on the one hand, the moribund condition of the poem’s immediate context which is Iran under political tyranny, and pronounce the need to bring about or at least dream of change on the other. There are in fact three pillars that elevate the poet’s vision—and which potentially shed light on the unfolding of the plot in *The Story of Javid*. First is Akhavan-Sales’s setting of stage in a “prison” as a spatial metaphor wherein his passion for Iran is held captive. The poet’s vision, at once poignant and cheery, is articulated from within this “lonely crypt” particularly as “the autumn cloud weeps bitter tears at the dead of night over the prison” (183). In the next stanza, Akhavan-Sales sarcastically compares the bitter state of such life under tyranny to a wonderland inside a “Qajar palace” out of which he yearns for a pastoral haven: “What a wonderland it is this Qajar palace, I too / Have a village of my own in this land of wonders” (183).

While the “Qajar palace” is a direct reference to *Zindan-i Qasr*, the Tehran Palace Prison wherein the poet composed his work as a political prisoner in 1966, there is a more negative connotation attached to the poem’s locale. Akhavan-Sales’s frustrated vision in a prison cell, allusively compared to a Qajar mansion, parallels the opening sections of *The Story of Javid* on that “Qajar morning” in 1922 when Javid first enters the ramshackle Tehran and knocks at the door of the Qajar Prince Malik-Ara, alas to be held captive and deprived of his livelihood for the next eight years (31). In fact, given the patriotic disposition of both men of letters, it is my contention that the skeptic attitude of Akhavan-Sales and Fassih towards the idea of Iran under Qajar rule is a doleful rumination over loss and defeat in nationalist terms. As citizen poets of an Iranian “imagined community,” the two literati draw upon the retrospective metaphor of Qajar Iran to brood over national loss and social stagnancy rampant in theirs as well as the readers’ historical presents. The long period of Qajar reign (1785–1925), of which Prince Malik-Ara is the chief representative in Fassih’s novel, is a period in Iranian history often characterized with “Manifold Defeat,” Kashani-Sabet’s innuendo that points to the frustrated ambitions of an imperial “manifest destiny” during the Qajar period (30, 41). In the Iranian nationalist discourse, she suggests, informing a reading of Akhavan-Sales and Fassih here, “‘Qajariya’ became synonymous with treachery, or literally, ‘country-selling’ (*vatan furushi*)” (168). The tendency to view the Qajar dynasty as the epitome of corruption and despotism, as Mohammad Tavakoli-Taraghi has rightly noted, “is a common feature of Orientalist, nationalist, and also Marxist historiography of nineteenth-century Iran” (7). Both Fassih and Akhavan-Sales seem informed by such totalizing perspectives on this historical period.

“This Autumn in Prison” addresses my reading of *The Story of Javid* on a second level in revealing the importance of masculinity to the ideal of Iran the poet envisions in captivity. Back in his “lonely crypt,” still dreaming of a way out of this Qajar wonderland, the poet deems it necessary to make a point: “I am in this prison guilty of being a *man*; oh Love / Call me a rogue if I am convicted of anything but” (182). For Yusif ‘Ali, being guilty of

“manhood” has been one amongst a plethora of personal and social reasons that undergird the epistemology of Akhavan-Sales’s “defeatism” in his poetry (63). There is in “This Autumn in Prison” a repressive and domineering masculinity disguised and implied as a warden who has undermined the poet’s vision of an Iranian masculinity for which the only means of expression is but to dream of “another place” through poesy. Insisting to his “Love” that he must be a “rogue” – “*khata nasl*” – should he be imprisoned for anything except his manhood only proves the importance of a masculine self-image to Akhavan-Sales’s sanity, and the viability of his patriotic vision inside the prison cell.

By the same token, masculinity is part and parcel of Fassih’s nationalist concerns. If we assume, as I do, that *The Story of Javid* is an account of the title character’s journey from innocence to experience, then masculinity is a crucial signifier that informs every stage of his development from Yazd to Tehran. In other words, masculinity lies at the heart of the novel’s conflicts, especially, the antagonism between Javid and Malik-Ara. From the Arcadian opening of the novel with Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* ceremony in Yazd – which is the Zoroastrian *rite de passage* to initiate a boy into adult manhood – all the way to the emasculating ordeals and mortifying episodes of religious persecution that Javid must suffer through in Tehran, Fassih seems consciously aware of his protagonist’s masculinity, first constructed in Yazd as an archetypically Iranian identity, and later put to test through a series of ordeals in conflict with Prince Malik-Ara, a repressive omen not unlike the apparition of warden in Akhavan-Sales’s poem that silences the fulfillment of a perfect *Iranian* masculinity.

On a more complex level, Javid, who has thus far been established as “guilty of being a *man*,” to quote Akhavan-Sales again (182), is poignantly embedded in the novel’s historical context. Given the significance of gender to the Iranian nationalist discourse, my analysis of Javid’s masculinity cannot evade an examination of his role as a participant observer in 1920s Iran. Because *The Story of Javid* is particularly set against the 1922–1930 period,

with recurring references to the emerging contestation of Qajar power, the shadow of Riza Khan's masculine authority—reinforced as the “hypermasculine savior” of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128)—cannot go unnoticed in the unfolding of the plot. In fact, while the iron fist of Riza Khan's state apparatus undermines the authority of Malik-Ara, and in turn leads to the coronation of the first Pahlavi Shah, it also facilitates Javid's ultimate triumph over the Ahriman in the Qajar Prince—hence, the resolution: the fulfillment of Javid's revenge. In this vein, I am going to argue, Javid's quest from innocence to experience entails the performance of a hypermasculine—and eventually misogynistic—identity in tandem with the normative vision of manhood reinforced by Riza Khan.

Eventually, Fassih and Akhavan-Sales's hankerings, imbued with an authentic conception of Iranian manhood, dovetail again through their nostalgia for a vision of pre-Islamic Iran. Having made clear the necessity of breaking free of his chains, Akhavan-Sales's persona now speaks of a pact he has made with an old sage, Mazdusht, “the fruit of Mazdak and Zoroaster / whose message to humanity, hark, is another deliverance” (184). Just as instinctively, it so appears, Fassih has imagined Javid, a Zoroastrian figuration, to revisit a significant period in Qajar history. As the author has suggested in an interview with Goli Emami et al., Javid is the beneficiary of the Iranian collective unconscious, and the imaginative end-product of a “genetic impulse” to draw upon the “rites and traditions” of ancient Iran (218). One may venture to imagine that Fassih's fascination with the Zoroastrian Javid stems from, or is at least inspired by, the rekindled “historical consciousness” of the earlier stages of Iranian nationalism (Ansari 17), when the literati were driven to retrace their ancient past to perhaps catch “glimpses of [bygone] glory” (Kashani-Sabet 41).

Nevertheless, while Akhavan-Sales ventures to reimagine an ancient faith in his search for a socio-political renaissance, Fassih takes the more taken road of realist fiction. Javid, a teenaged boy from the religious minority of Zoroastrians in early twentieth-century Yazd, begins a journey to

Tehran in search of his family. On a simple and conventional plotline as such, the quest of the protagonist from the peripheral community of marginal Zoroastrians in Yazd (innocence) to the centralizing authority of a corrupt state apparatus in Tehran (experience) opens a window for Fassih to laud his protagonist as a nostalgia provoking national trope. Masculinity, I have suggested, plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the plot to the extent that a study of Javid's role as a participant observer in 1920s Iran is incomplete without taking into account the significance of masculinity to each and every stage of his development.

In light of the comparative outlook above, there are two axes around which the narrative unfolds in *The Story of Javid*. First and foremost is Fassih's imaginative investment in a body of Zoroastrian tropes that associate Javid's thoughts and actions to an ancient and pre-Islamic (as opposed to Islamophobic) conception of Iran. Secondly, there is a dualistic worldview, predominating Javid's hardships in Malik-Ara's household, between decency and corruption. A religious minority and an immediate outcast as soon as he enters Tehran, Javid is characterized as a righteous outsider who is affectionately introduced in the Preface as Fassih's "*pisarak-i Irani*" [an Iranian kid] (*SJ* vii, further elaborated in the next section). Then pitted against the tyrannical figure of Prince Malik-Ara, Javid is juxtaposed against a waning Qajar hegemony, at the heart of a temporal and geographic metaphor signifying historical defeat and national stagnancy, which Fassih has portrayed in evident disdain. In fact, as Fassih has suggested, the overriding conflict between the righteous protagonist and his princely nemesis lends itself to a series of interpretations that vary from a polemical narration of late-Qajar history to a celebration of the Iranian collective unconscious (Emami et al. "Interview" 218). Considering both views, it is my argument that Javid's quest from the utopian world of plentitude in Zoroastrian Yazd to the dystopian world of uncertainty in Qajar Tehran is also the story of a development from innocence to experience that constitutes the character as the—albeit problematic—exemplar of an original Iranian manhood.

In-depth critical works on the corpus of Fassih's writing are scant if not nonexistent. And while the majority of these studies focus on the well-established Aryan family saga, very few works (and all in brief) have considered *The Story of Javid* in earnest. Anahid Ujakyans, for one, has reviewed the novel in terms of an organic unity that firstly reflects the historical context of the narrative on the "corrupt atmosphere" of Malik-Ara's household (105), and secondly furnishes the description of Javid's inner thoughts to the moral crises that the boy will undergo throughout his quest (106). Beyond such formalism, Hasan Mir-Abidini has focused on "the struggle of the lonely individual" within "the chaotic society" of Qajar Tehran so as to read a *Bildungsroman* in light of the historic events that mark the chronology of the plot (1015–17). While I am likewise determined to unearth the aesthetic subtleties of the novel and examine how they transpire through context, I am equally concerned with the vital but hitherto unexplored notion of Javid's gender identity—which takes the form of an Iranian archetype. Reflected both on the surface and within the dramatic structure of the narrative, masculinity is a significant theme in *The Story of Javid* that informs every stage of the protagonist's development from as early as the Arcadian atmosphere in Yazd at the outset wherein Javid is initiated during his *Sidrih Pushan* as a "complete and virile Zoroastrian man" (10), well towards the end when Javid is literally emasculated in the hands of the tyrannical Malik-Ara (242). At the end of the day, Javid the Iranian man bears more symbolic significance than Javid the Zoroastrian boy.

### Call Me Esmail

In examining the opening line to *Moby-Dick*, "Call me Ishmael" (MD 25), I argued before that the implications of a self-aggrandizing sentence as such are suffocating for Fedallah, leading throughout the narrative to the systemic silencing of the otherwise influential Parsee. If we imagine, for the sake argument, that Ishmael has with the best of his intentions played the authorial role of dehumanizing the "Other" of his journey so as to highlight

his own Americanness, then Esmail Fassih's approach towards Javid cannot differ more. The omniscient third-person narrator of *The Story of Javid*—whom there is reason to believe is interchangeable with the author himself—is in fact the voice that assumes moral responsibility to reclaim Javid, this “Iranian kid,” at the centre of the narrative (*SJ* vii). Therefore, the narrator and Fassih by extension are unflinchingly resolved to re-present the “calamity and brutality” that Javid has been through during his difficult years in Qajar Tehran (*ibid*). In what appears to be a fictional Preface to the fifth reprint of the novel, and which I take as an opening to Fedallah's “proleptic narrative” as well, Fassih claims to have met and interviewed the elderly Javid long after the actual events of plot took place. “This author,” says Fassih referring to himself in third person, “met with the hero of this novel late in his life at a university abroad” (*SJ* viii), perhaps in London if we choose to follow another fictional encounter with an old Zoroastrian professor in Fassih's final novel *Talkh Kam* [*Dispirited*] which was published in 2007. “Contrary to [my] previous works,” Fassih self-promotes in the Preface:

*The Story of Javid* is the real-life account of a young boy of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, which occurs during the first decade of the century [1310s AH, 1920s AD] at the height of Qajar decadence. The calamity and brutality befallen on a faithful and pious human being constitute the canvas of the narrative. Also, his mental and emotional reflections, as well as the power of his faith in his ancestors' religious traditions have been preserved in the narrative. (vii)

While Anahid Ujakyans claims that the Preface is indeed factual (104), my personal queries have proven less certain. Publisher and translator Goli Emami and literary scholar Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, who have both interviewed Fassih, are rather dubious. While Emami is certain that the Preface is “totally fictional,” Ghanoonparvar wrote to me that he does not rule out the possibility that it is a mere framing device common in Persian literary tradition, not to mention that it might as well be a conscious strategy on the part of Fassih—given the time of the novel's fifth reprint in 1992—to avert “the censors' eyes” in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This could be

particularly the case in light of the fact that at least as of 1994, a script based on *The Story of Javid* by the renowned Iranian filmmaker Bahman Farmanara remains banned by the Iranian government (qtd. in Emami et al. "Interview" 224). Therefore, the paratextual implications of Fassih's Preface are twofold—one of which proves definitive to my reading of Javid as a national trope.

On the one hand, Fassih seems legitimately cautious that a reprint of the novel in the years following the consolidation of power by the Islamic Republic, particularly throughout the 1980s, could have jeopardized the book's publication since the censorship apparatus of the new political order was then fully in place. The immediate impact of such concerns would have been to include a Preface so as to draw the line between the immediate context of the author following the Islamic Revolution and the historical setting of the novel within the cultural context of Qajar Iran as a haven, Fassih adds rather conservatively, for "pseudo Muslim Princes" like Malak-Ara, Javid's nemesis (*SJ* vii-viii). In fact, the highly apologetic tone of the Preface with regard to the portrayal of Javid as a pre-Islamic figure can easily attest to Ghanoonparvar's claim. "Half a century past the actual events of plot," particularly in light of "massive historical developments including the Islamic Revolution," Fassih tactfully points out, "may potentially render certain reflections in the novel, such as the wrathful denouement when Javid exits Darkhoongah [after murdering Malik-Ara], as intangible, and incompatible to realities in present-day Iran." Fassih is "certain," he needs us to believe, "that his enlightened Iranian reader will take these points into consideration" (viii).

On the other hand, a more far-reaching impact of the Preface transcending—as always—the petty ideological whims of the censor at the Ministry of Culture is Fassih's playful hint at the possibility that *The Story of Javid* is based on a true story. In what Gerard Genette terms a fictive but "disavowing authorial preface," Fassih claims that Javid is way more than a mere figment of his imagination and, however dramatized, the novel



recounts “the real-life” story of a young Zoroastrian from Yazd in 1920s (*SJ* vii). Claiming that he has met Javid in the final years of the man’s life, Fassih disavows full authorial engagement with the literary production at hand, and in turn lays stress on the act of giving moral voice to “the emotions, pains, heartbreaks, despair, and angers of this *“pisarak-i Irani”* [an Iranian kid] (ibid). Therefore, by way of describing the “circumstances of acquisition,” following Genette’s understanding of preface as paratext, Fassih embraces the “opportunity to provide the more or less expanded narrative,” in our case *The Story of Javid*, “furnishing the textual fiction with a kind of frame narrative” (282).

The “frame narrative” of having met Javid well in advance of literary reproduction becomes a strategy not only for Fassih to self-canonize the novel as unique to his corpus (*SJ* vii), but also to cross the fine line between fiction and reality in order to further humanize the otherwise oppressed character. In pleading with his reader to treat Javid as more real than fictive, more historical than mythical, Fassih is adamant to stand up for his “Iranian kid,” and make the boy’s voice more audible. In other words, the surplus of meaning that Fassih negotiates in his Preface—that is, the paratextual space which Genette aptly calls “thresholds of interpretation” (v)—is in fact to indicate that Javid would have been lost in the chaos of late Qajar anarchy, his pain and loss with him, were it not for Fassih’s rearticulation of the boy’s story as a narrative embedded in *“khak-i garm-i dasht-i Iran”* [the warm soil of the plains of Iran] (*SJ* 7).

To draw another set of parallels between Fedallah and Javid, Fassih (whose first name, as it happens, is Esmail: Arabic and Persian for Ishmael) assumes moral responsibility to unearth the truth about a boy from the marginal community of Iranian Zoroastrians. In this vein, the omniscient narrator of *The Story of Javid* stands in contrast to *Moby-Dick*’s Ishmael and his seaward narrative wherein the act of story telling simply glosses over the “proleptic narrative” of Fedallah, leading to the perpetual silence of the Gujarati Parsee. But unlike Ishmael, the self-fictionalized Fassih of the

Preface retracts from a position of self-proclaimed heroism and allows his protagonist to assume centre stage, going straight in the first line of the first page not to “Call me Esmail” but to “Call him Javid” – opening the narrative on “a hot and dry day, towards the end of the summer in 1922” when the protagonist was on the road to Tehran in search of his missing family (1). Simply put, *The Story of Javid* centres on a landed trope of nationalism, exemplifying an impeccable symbol of Iranian masculinity. Let me make it clear, of course, that Javid’s narrative of Iranianness, as I will note in conclusion, comes at the price of subduing women’s voices in the narrative just as Ishmael’s own narrative of Americanness materialized at the expense of Fedallah’s silence.

In what follows, Javid’s journey from an Arcadian Yazd to a dystopian Tehran is the means to understand Fassih’s take on gendered discourses of nationalism. In the first section, titled “On the Road,” the harmonious life of Javid in Zoroastrian Yazd constitutes a moral high ground that is to be contradicted upon arrival in Qajar Tehran. In particular, Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* or male initiation rite at the outset of his journey reveals that a supposedly authentic and geographically rooted sense of Iranianness is tied closely to Javid’s performance of masculinity. Moreover, the politics of the protagonist’s religious experience, highlighted during the very rite, foreshadows the battle between good and evil that is to follow in Malik-Ara’s household. In the second section, “Qajar Tehran,” I suggest that the Iranian capital under the rule of Ahmad Shah (r. 1909–1925), the last of the Qajar monarchs represented in the narrative through the microcosm of Malik-Ara’s household, is undeserving of true men such as Javid. The archetypal vision of Javid’s masculinity, therefore, is to be violently subdued and emasculated through Malik-Ara’s repressive and castrating authority in Tehran. But further on I demonstrate how the rise of Riza Khan, leading eventually to Malik-Ara’s downfall, facilitates Javid’s ultimate triumph over the Ahriman in the Qajar Prince. As Javid’s naivety turns into a combative form of tortured defiance, I argue in conclusion that the final twist in his performance of the original Iranian manhood emulates a prototype of Riza

Khan as the “hypermasculine savior” of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128), which is highly problematic particularly with regard to Javid’s treatment of female characters in the novel.

Subsequent to the close reading outlined above, an analysis of Fedallah’s immediate kin in Persian *Adab* will be pathbreaking but far from sufficient. Fassih’s landed rendition of Iran, materialized through an endearing fascination with pre-Islamic history, constitutes a will to resist oppression not only to defy domestic tyranny but also to withstand global inequalities in the aftermath of the events in August 1953. Therefore, *The Story of Javid*, as the first chapter of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative,” revitalizes the Parsee in the immediate context of *Moby-Dick*. It demonstrates how Fassih’s transmutation of pre-Islamic nostalgia imported in part from European thought can result in an *inward* narrative of Iranianness to significantly counter Melville’s appropriation of the same Orientalist discourse to construct Ishmael’s *outward* narrative of Americanness. With Fedallah’s voice lost in this coup de grâce, Javid’s narrative shall at least in part restore the Parsee’s voice in the frenzy of Ishmael’s attempts to dramatize the *Pequod*’s wreck. But that alone, I will note, cannot revive the full extent of Fedallah’s defiant disposition in *Moby-Dick* not least because Javid’s story, like that of Ishmael, registers sites of violence towards female characters. It is through Dowlatabadi’s Mergan, and her capacity to echo the Parsee’s voice *past* the masculinist nationalism of Fassih, *beyond* the textual violence of Melville, and *against* the canonical formation of *Moby-Dick* as a “world text” that I propose Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” to reach its full and most democratic potential in the next chapter.

### On the Road

The opening six chapters of *The Story of Javid*, comprising the events of the boy’s journey from Yazd to Tehran and the memories conjured up along the way, surpass in significance the rest of the narrative. Significantly enough, the sum of these chapters—set *on the road* from central to northern Iran—

extend the resonance of Fassih's fictional Preface, and establish the mythopoeic construction of the protagonist as an archetype of masculinity morally tied to the author's endearing affection for pre-Islamic (as opposed to Islamophobic) Iran. This landed rendition of the nation, reading against Ishmael's seafaring account of America and articulating by implication Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," is originated through the sequence of events and recollections occurring in this journey.

Upon entering Tehran after twenty-three days on the road, Javid is far from impressed by the nation's capital. The unwelcoming atmosphere that strikes the boy is the first of several indications that gesture at the sequence of dreadful events that unfold to shape the *Bildungsroman* of Javid's life. "A city made of dust, wood, and tiles; silent and despondent; wide as a wilderness" (SJ 30). What seems particularly hurtful to Javid, however, is not the poverty-stricken state of Qajar Tehran per se, but the depressing fact, in his eyes, that the city "was not what he expected of the capital of his great ancient and imperial country" (ibid). This utopian vision of homeland contradicted at first sight of Tehran conjures up the Arcadian state of harmony during Javid's *rite de passage* to which Fassih most significantly opens the novel. But first it is important to reflect more on Javid's first impressions of Tehran.

In search of his parents, Javid has found his way uptown towards Malik-Ara's mansion in a short journey that poignantly reflects a wide class-divide. "With an enormous and magnificent exterior in the midst of a humble and despicable market," Malik-Ara's residence protrudes against the rest of the buildings in the area (SJ 31). In fact, the tension that characterizes Javid's first encounter with Malik-Ara's household foreshadows the bigger conflict at hand. In the short and densely worded space of the seventh chapter, Javid's initial encounter sums up the torturous chain of events that is to follow. From verbal abuse to religious profiling, to mental and physical violence, Fassih gives the reader a peek at the catastrophe upon Javid. Approaching the house "timidly" and "shaking with fear," Javid knocks at

the door before facing the furious butler of the house, the sickly and pathetic Ghulum-Ali Khan. Fassih, at his sarcastic best here, ridicules the butler's fury with Javid, emulating the royal pomposity that the Prince's mansion best represents: "As if the intrusion upon that stately Qajar morning [*an subh-i dulat-i Qajar*] in the hands of this strange peasant boy was utterly ill-advised" (31). Deriding him as an "untouchable *Gabr*," a bigoted slur applied to Zoroastrians, and smacking his face with a cherry stick to punish the boy for his inquisitions, Ghulum-Ali juxtaposes the corrupt state of affairs inside Malik-Ara's abode with the impeccably Iranian moral high ground that is manifest in the character of Javid.

To rub salt into the wound, Abu-Turab, Malik-Ara's other lackey, and one of Javid's chief enemies later on, walks out of the gate to clean the front yard. An enthusiastic puppy then walks towards the lackey looking for a playmate. The dog's innocence, obviously, does not rhyme with Abu-Turab's brutality and turns into a conflict that can only lead to one end. With Javid still a first hand witness, Abu-Turab tramples on the puppy, picks it up, and chokes it to death (*SJ* 34). "*Sag kushi*" [dog killing], according to Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary, connotes an inconsequential act of "murder that goes unreprimanded." If Javid, then, is put in a position to witness such horrendous act, he could potentially foresee his own fate—and clearly that of his family—inside Malik-Ara's mansion. With Abu-Turab's *sag kushi*, Fassih externalizes the vehicle in a metaphor, and gives gory reality to a verbal expression in order to highlight the plight of the protagonist ahead of his ordeals. It is only after this momentous event that the gates of the mansion finally open wide and Prince Malik-Ara's carriage rides out and passes by Javid indifferently, leaving the boy unnoticed, "his lips swollen, and his injured mouth still burning" (35).

In spite of the air of impending doom throughout Javid's first impressions of Tehran, *The Story of Javid* has not just begun with the *sag kushi* at Malik-Ara's gate. Before that, Fassih has contrastingly set up an Arcadian atmosphere at the outset of the novel in Yazd so as to make Javid's later

hardships resonate more poignantly. In short, Yazd and Tehran characterize two diametrically opposed worlds not just in Javid's but also in the narrator's mind. As importantly, the road between the two cities becomes a liminal space between the utopian visions of homeland highlighted in Javid's male initiation or *Sidrih Pushan* and the darkly realistic and emasculating ordeals that the boy will and must go through in search of his family. It is therefore interesting that the exposition of the protagonist should take place *on the road* – within the very gap that separates the two cities according to the novel's dualistic cosmology.

As the novel opens with Javid and his old uncle Dastur Bahram on the road on a hot summer day in 1922, we are invited to a world at odds with the distressing air of their planned destination: "A delicate kid in white, fourteen or fifteen years of age," he "was born in a village near Yazd, his name [was] Javid, and his ancestors had been Parsee Zoroastrians in the outskirts of Yazd for hundreds of years" (SJ 2). The narrator thus describes Javid's innocent disposition as radiant, naïve, and positive. What is more, his uncle Bahram, as the extension of the narrator's voice, reveals Javid's innocence in the broader frame of the narrative. He attempts to at once warn the boy of the ordeals ahead and provoke the reader's conscience so s/he would take sides with him. For instance, as they approach Tehran nearing the city of Qom, a revered religious centre in Shia Iran, Bahram warns his nephew to stay alert lest they get harassed since "the people around here," he would surmise, "are not particularly fond of [us] Zoroastrians" (4). Whereas Javid reacts rather proudly – asserting, "I am not afraid of anyone for who I am" – Bahram reechoes the narrator who has previously warned that "the people of this land [of Iran] have forgotten their roots and origin" (ibid).

In fact, we are meant to believe that Javid's position vis-à-vis "this land" of Iran is far more organic than that of "the people" the narrator reprimands. I have noted that in response to Bahram's cautious skepticism, Javid puts up an air of naïve defiance. Javid owes this tone of confidence to

the initiation rite he has passed through prior to the journey. "*Sidrih Pushan*," the narrator notes, "was a day during which the [Zoroastrian] boy would leave the realm of childhood and enter the world of adult manhood" (SJ 6). An account of the rite is recalled in the form of a flashback on one "sleepless night" when Javid "had lain down on the warm soil of the plains of Iran," "*khak-i garm-i dasht-i Iran*" (7). Such affectionate setting of stage on the Iranian "land" warmly embracing the reminiscing boy is highly noteworthy, particularly since Javid's entry into the sphere of adult masculinity is not completed without Fassih's rendition of the boy's *rite de passage* in terms of a utopian vision of homeland that establishes him as the agent of a highly imaginary but original Iranian manhood—not unlike Akhavan-Sales's mythopoeic Mazdusht who, as we noted, stands at the heart of the poet's patriotic disquiet, redeeming a prisoner who is "guilty of being a *man*" (182). By the same token, "the complete and virile Zoroastrian man" that Javid grows into following the initiation rite becomes for Fassih an ideal prototype to contrast the dystopian state of Malik-Ara's household in Qajar Tehran (SJ 10).

The recollection of Javid's *Sidrih Pushan* proceeds from "the warm soil of the plains of Iran" as the boy walks down the memory lane back to the day the ceremony was performed. That the rite, according to Dastur Bahram, is a prerequisite for Javid's quest shapes the overall thesis of the novel. *Sidrih Pushan*, the narrator notes, "was not just an occasion to wear *Sidrih* or *Kushti*" (SJ 7), sacred badges of initiation (Snoek 92), but also an event to recite and celebrate the articles of faith in the presence of a religious authority. This also provides the opportunity to introduce the ethical principles upon which Javid is characterized. Accordingly, Javid will become a self-proclaimed follower of Zoroaster, an adherent of "good thoughts, good words, and good deeds" (SJ 8–9). More revealingly, with regard to his fateful encounter with Malik-Ara, Javid's vows continue with a commitment "to follow the path of his ancestors and fight against evil" (8). Therefore, the politics of Javid's religious experience shed light on the construction of the boy's masculinity through a passage solemnly predicated on defiance against evil. In sum,

Javid's naïve defiance is rooted in his *Sidrih Pushan*, the symbolic impact of which is to be projected through Fassih's nationalist concerns as he portrays the reminiscing boy lying down on "the warm soil" of Iran thinking of the moral imperative to find his parents and counter evil, if necessary (SJ 7).

While the flashback to Javid's *Sidrih Pushan* is the first highlight of the journey from Yazd to Tehran, the death of Dastur Bahram brings the second climax before Javid finally arrives in Tehran. Bahram's will and testament is the narrator's second opportunity to yet again emphasize the Zoroastrian line of Javid's descent and underline the boy's rectitude before pitting him against Malik-Ara. In the third chapter of the novel, Bahram halts the journey with a premonition of imminent death to address Javid for a final pearl of wisdom. The ensuing dialogue over Bahram's deathbed turns into an occasion to revalidate Javid's Iranianness for the last time: "We are rooted in this land," my boy, "do keep that in mind" (SJ 16). Since Bahram insists, moments before passing, that he is dying "in exile" (15), he deems it urgent to remind his nephew of own interpretation of their family tree. Javid is thereby informed that their distant great grand parents had migrated to India centuries ago to join their Parsee relatives (Fedallah's descendants, if you like) in order to escape Safavid persecution. However, and here is the rub, they soon returned and resettled in Iran in defiance, and kept their ancestral Fire Temple alight (15). Going through these facts with "a fading voice," Bahram does first and foremost insist on his inward attachment to Iranian land and emphatically, even obsessively, reminds Javid that "our family history is as old as the ancient history of this very land [of Iran]," and that "we have always lived in this country practicing this faith" (ibid). Highlighting a cultural, historical, and aesthetic embeddedness in an Iranian "imagined community" – shared by Dastur Bahram, Fassih, as well as the reader by invitation – Javid is nationalized as an inherently Iranian trope.

Returning to my comparative framework, Bahram's parochial wishes for Javid are just the opposite of what Fedallah's disposition actually constitutes as a worldly traveller; but Fassih's landed portrayal of his



protagonist is just as defiant, and in fact the closest we can get to the Parsee's "proleptic narrative" at this point. To wrap up, it is helpful to compare Javid's *passage* into Fassih's conception of the "original Iranian manhood" with Ishmael's identification with what he cherishes as "immaculate manliness" definitive to his understanding of "democracy" in America (*MD* 166). Ishmael's endorsement of this particular brand of manhood—reproducing a Tocquevillian appreciation of America as exclusively *white* and *masculine* (135)—has proven quite appealing to Melville's narrator. But later on aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael's quest for "immaculate manliness," seemingly democratic as presumed with regard to Queequeg, proved too suffocating for Fedallah's voice. Surviving at the expense of the Parsee's life, I have noted too many times that Ishmael's expansionist quest glosses over Fedallah's capacity to articulate his own story. In comparison, Javid's mythopoeic construction as an exemplar of masculinity inspiring a quest against domestic tyranny is more inward-looking and protective of land than Ishmael's "immaculate manliness" which is seafaring, and obsessed with expansion. Therefore, at least in light of the genealogy of both literary representations as figures predicated on European manners of appropriating ancient Persian history in Iran and America, reproducing nationalist and Orientalist myths respectively, Javid can be read as the first embodiment of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" in my thesis. Following the account of his experiences on the road, Javid is finally introduced as the *sui generis* figuration of an Iranian boy from the construction of his archetypal image during *Sidrih Pushan* to a celebration of his character as a national trope upon Bahram's death. Fassih's *pisarak-i Irani* is indeed the mythopoeic yet historically rooted, highly imaginary but original exemplar of Iranian manhood—to be severely put to the test as he finally enters Qajar Tehran.

### **Qajar Tehran**

The Arcadian atmosphere of the opening chapters of *The Story of Javid*, with all its myth-making and symbolizing perspectives on the protagonist—

largely predicated on Fassih's "pre-Islamic frenzy" (Zia-Ebrahimi "Self-Orientalization" 466)—come to a halt with Bahram's death near Tehran. Up to this point, Javid's journey from Yazd to Tehran has paved an avenue to unveil the protagonist's statue as a mythopoeic Iranian trope. At the outset, Javid's *Sidrih Pushan* laid out the moral thesis of the novel, initiating the boy into a defiant if naïve young man about to set off in search of his parents. On the road, then, Dastur Bahram accompanied the boy not only as a spiritual sage to guide Javid along the way, but also as a vehicle for the narrator's voice, ventriloquizing the urgency to foreground the roots of the protagonist in the "warm soil" of Iranian land (*SJ* 6). Following Bahram's death, however, Javid, now a lonely traveller approaching his nemesis, can sense the air of trouble as "the word Tehran, and the name Prince Malik-Ara began to have an ominous ring" to his ears (19).

At this point, considering Javid's imminent conflict with the Qajar Prince, the boy's naïve defiance is to be severely put to the test throughout a series of ordeals, which render his journey from Yazd to Tehran as that of a passage from innocence to experience. In an attempt to read Javid's character development in terms of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," I have proposed that the passage from Yazd to Tehran could imaginatively open with "Call him Javid," and constitute a landed rendition of Iran compared to the seaward account of America in *Moby-Dick*. In other words, as elaborated before, the idea behind Javid's story, shaped through Fassih's nationalist project proposed in his Preface, is to humanize an otherwise oppressed character, portray him within an idealized tableau of his homeland, then commemorate his suffering as an emblem of national loss. Following such inner logic, Javid's loss of innocence because of the ordeals he undergoes translates into a narrative of "Manifold Defeat," Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's innuendo that refers to the contraction of Iranian territory and land under Qajar rule (30). Fassih, I thus suggest, revisits Iran during the transitional years of late Qajar period, while focusing on a protagonist inscribed as a national trope wary of his homeland's destiny—and, last but not least, found "guilty" by his opponents "of being a *man*" (Akhavan-Sales 182).

Northrop Frye introduces his theory of myths by stressing the “affinity between the mythical and the abstractly literary” as the link to comprehend various “aspects of fiction, especially the more popular fiction which is realistic enough to be plausible in its incidents and yet sufficiently romantic to be a ‘good story,’” that is, “a clearly designed one” (139). This is the case with a popular novel such as *The Story of Javid*, which has just been through a fifteenth reprint in Iran by the year 2012. As one of Fassih’s widely read works yet lingering on the thresholds of the Canon of Persian fiction, *The Story of Javid* promotes a polemical approach to contemporary history – characteristic of literary fiction in Iran following the cataclysmic events of August 1953 (Mir-Abidini 471) – that incorporates the linear development of the protagonist with a body of Zoroastrian myths and allegories that inscribe the novel’s nationalist theme. Fassih’s nostalgic recourse to ancient history, therefore, informs the conflict that permeates Javid’s relationship with Malik-Ara. From the emblematic image of *Huma*, the Achaemenid griffin on the book’s jacket as a symbol of “splendor and glory” (Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary, Figure 3), to the Preface itself as the statement of Fassih’s personal attachment to his protagonist, Javid is pregnant with implications. A defiant and manly figure of national splendor, Javid sets off in search of his parents, and finally reaches Tehran to confront a Qajar Prince who stands for domestic tyranny, political corruption, and social stagnancy.

It is therefore no coincidence that the account of Javid’s ordeals in Tehran, following a *rite de passage* and a symbolic road trip, must begin at Malik-Ara’s gate with Abu-Turab’s *sag kushi* or “dog killing” (SJ 34) as the inconsequential act of murder that foreshadows forthcoming hardships. As the plot proceeds from there, the morally bankrupt condition of an ill-governed state – also summed up in the microcosm of Malik-Ara’s household – is rendered as the perpetrator of Javid’s pain, undermining the Iranian man portrayed through character. From the narrator’s bird’s-eye view, the “Tehran” of Javid’s time “was in a perpetual *Qajar stupor* from morning till the dead of night (134). There is clearly a sense of urgency in *The Story of Javid* to associate a despairing sense of regression from the ideals

set by the nation's forefathers with the historical backdrop that informs the narrative. There are, for instance, numerous occasions throughout the narrative when villainous characters from Malik-Ara to his lackeys are effectively aligned with the ruling regime both to question the moral grounds on which the society is built, and to accuse the Qajars at large as partners in crime.

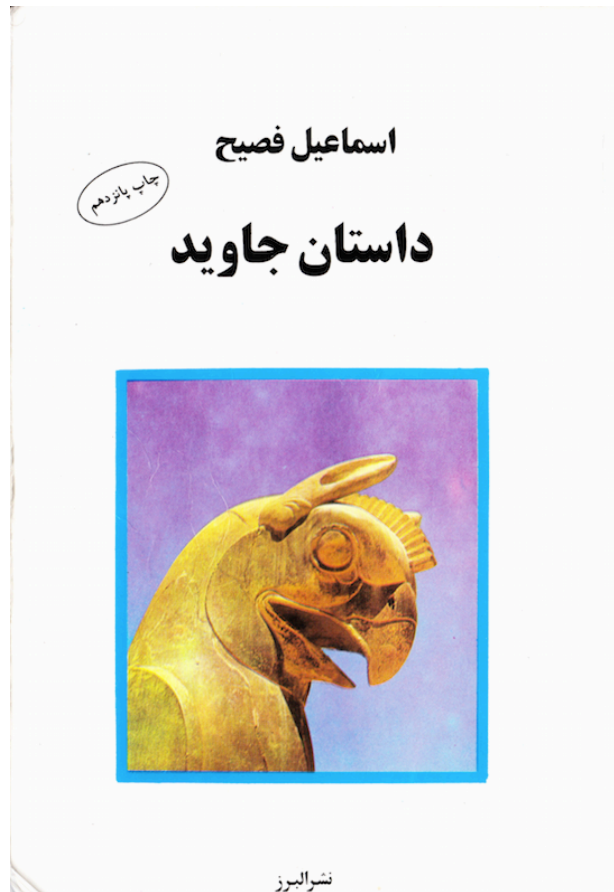


Figure 3. Achaemenid griffin on the jacket of *The Story of Javid*

For instance, Javid is on one occasion talked into a secret dealing with Abu-Turab, Malik-Ara's lackey, in an effort to save Layla, a woman (and his future wife) who has been kidnapped and confined in a brothel. In order to convince Abu-Turab to reveal the whereabouts of Layla, Javid has to tempt him with the money and jewelry that the woman's family has provided. Yet to curb Abu-Turab's violence, Javid has to first hide half of the money. He thereby tears a bunch of bills from the middle, with "half of Ahmad Shah's

face on the banknote ripped off" (SJ 161). This observation brings the historical backdrop of the occasion back to the reader's mind through the mutilated image of a banknote—and that of monarch himself—to highlight the impoverished state of the characters involved in the episode from Abu-Turab himself as the emblem of immorality to the absent Layla as the epitome of battered womanhood in an ill-governed society. The torn bills will of course be reattached, but the tarnished image of the Qajar monarch is forever associated with the bleak atmosphere of 1920s Tehran.

Chief amongst the symbols of a waning Qajar hegemony is Prince Malik-Ara himself who, unsurprisingly, poses the biggest threat to Fassih's construction of the original Iranian man. A prince active in "court and parliament" (SJ 46), Malik-Ara's suffocating presence over "Javid's life" resembles "the shadow of a giant eagle" that is unforgiving and predatory (120). The instant Javid arrives in the Prince's household, he becomes the target of sustained mental and emotional abuse, religious profiling, and physical torture by a lot who summarily find him guilty of being an "outsider" to their Qajar realm (69). By far, the most painful manifestation of Javid's exclusion from the world of Qajar Tehran is Malik-Ara's ultimate decree to subdue Fassih's "Iranian kid" by forcing the boy, in the first of many assaults, into circumcision, before eventually decreeing to castrate him. I tend to view this chain of action as a form of sexual anxiety on the part of Malik-Ara whose efforts to undermine Javid's autonomy will ironically highlight the significance of the boy's masculinity to Fassih's national psyche. As if murdering his parents were not enough, Malik-Ara subjects Javid to domestic work and decrees that he must first "be turned into *human* lest people speak ill of the household" (66). It is only after a mohel enters the house that it becomes apparent what Malik-Ara's euphemism actually means. Javid "must be a Muslim good and proper," circumcised and admissible to the family (67). The ensuing circumcision, according to the narrator, is not to convert Javid into the faith as Islamic tradition might require, but "to suppress and subdue a wicked outsider who had invaded the territory of this [Qajar] household" (69). Javid's foreskin, therefore,

becomes a token of Otherness to mutilate so as to undermine his autonomy. In what at first appears to be an act of religious policing, Javid's circumcision becomes an act of silencing the outsider. Submitting finally – and for the last time – to Malik-Ara's whim, the defenseless Javid lets go of resistance, trying instead with all his might “not to shed a tear” in defeat (70).

Returning to the narrator's description of Tehran as entrenched “in a perpetual *Qajar stupor*” (SJ 134), it is possible to correspond the presumed decadence of the age to the broader canvas of the narrative, and actually link Prince Malik-Ara to his Royal Highness himself. Moreover, given Javid's role as the Other of the Prince's world sitting at the heart of Fassih's nationalist concerns, it is even possible to read into the connotations behind the “*Qajar stupor*” of Tehran haunting the characters, and reimagine it as transcending time and space beyond the immediacy of the plot in 1920s Tehran. “In this city, in the capital of this nation, at this point in Iranian history,” the narrator pontificates:

They had crowned the last Qajar monarch (Ahmad Mirza, the youngest heir to Muhammad Ali Shah) to sit on the Peacock Throne to head an imperial nation, a position long ago occupied by Cyrus the Great and Darius [Achaemenid pre-Islamic kings]. The pompous and corrupt Qajar Princes, however, were holding on to the crown, abusing power to secure their corrupt and immoral kin, and to plunder the nation's resources. (229)

Given the frenzy of invoking pre-Islamic kings and statesmen for nostalgic “glimpses of [bygone] glory” (Kashani-Sabet 41), the narrator's treatment of Qajar history is biased and unbending, his rhetoric polemical and far from impartial. Not that the novel makes any claim to historiography, but it does give memorable form to Ahmad Shah's reign to the effect of highlighting the humanity of Zoroastrian Javid in contrast to the darkness of the age. As I have noted, Fassih's appropriation of pre-Islamic nostalgia, inherited from his late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century nationalist predecessors, reaches back to the late Qajar period with a political unconscious and global awareness spanning from the immediate context of the narrative to that of the Preface in postrevolutionary Iran. It is even possible to read the novel

with an “implicit context” in mind (Frye’s term). That is to say, the account of Javid’s pain and suffering nationalized in the Preface and during the *Sidrih Pushan* in Yazd, even after Malik-Ara’s death in Tehran, foreshadow the long-lasting impact of the boy’s quest on the larger canvas of Fasih’s Iran.

In his study of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Frye notes that the play “is a successfully completed romantic quest made tragic by its implicit context.” In other words, “everybody knows that King Henry died almost immediately and that sixty years of unbroken disaster followed for England,” a poignant fact that clearly shapes the viewer’s response to the play (221). More pertinently, the “implicit context” of *Moby-Dick* constitutes a textual dynamic interweaving the ideology of Manifest Destiny, Ishmael’s seafaring account of America, and then his promotion of the *Pequod*’s “WHALING VOYAGE” as an oceanic event surpassing a “BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGHANISTAN” (*MD* 29). Thereby, in a readerly consciousness such as mine in the previous chapter, *Moby-Dick* turns in part into a statement on hijacked planes and drones writ large, with Fedallah’s story left untold on the margins. In search of the Parsee’s “proleptic narrative” now, there comes a work of Persian fiction predicated on another Zoroastrian figure, and equally ripe with implications.

The “implicit context” of Javid’s story is reflected in various remarks that augur the enduring repercussions of the boy’s suffering on a national scale. In his desperate search for his sister Afsaneh, held captive (and later murdered) in one of Malik-Ara’s gardens, Javid does momentarily lose faith in Zoroastrianism, and is no longer able to “foresee,” as he naïvely used to, “any credibility for the spiritual and intellectual future of his homeland” (*SJ* 259). Even worse, at his most desperate, Javid takes it that his pain and suffering is part and parcel of a rather “universal and eternal” despair interrupting the course of his destiny and that of his nation (296). Interestingly enough, this abrupt shift of focus from Javid’s personal loss to Fasih’s collective concern conjures up a series historic events in the reader’s

mind that shape the “implicit context” of Javid’s story: Potentially, from the fall of the Qajars and the rise of the Pahlavis as the historical backdrop of the story (1925) to World War II and the Allied Occupation of Iran (1941); from the Cold War and Operation AJAX (1953) culminating at last in the Islamic Revolution (1979) marking the moment of Fassih’s Preface in 1981. Thus in a way, Javid’s ultimate—but problematic—triumph not just over Malik-Ara but also over “universal and eternal” despair also constitutes the resilience of Fassih’s own rendition of Iran. Much revealingly, a morbid concern for Iran and Iranians continues to haunt Javid’s worldview on both a national and global level well after murdering Malik-Ara and quenching the evil in the Qajar Prince.

Problems with Javid’s establishment as the original Iranian man arise when one digs deep into gendered discourses of nationalism that are embedded in the narrative. Which is precisely why I finally propose that *The (landed) Story of Javid* will eventually fall short to fully and most democratically articulate the defiant inclination of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative.” At this point, it is important to remember that whereas Javid’s masculinity is violently subdued in Malik-Ara’s household, Fassih’s gendered idealism remains performatively at work, functioning on a more figurative but highly problematic layer as Javid vows to avenge his family’s blood and protect his friend Suraya at one and the same time. In the meantime, a defining shift in the historical landscape of the narrative takes hold of Javid’s destiny across the Qajar era as the authoritarian figure of Riza Khan, whose shadow has been lurking under the text all along, finally challenges the waning authority of Malik-Ara and eventually facilitates Javid’s revenge over the Qajar Prince.

Before going any further, I must note that Fassih’s characterization of the protagonist has been thoroughly imbued with what Raewyn Connell calls “normalizing theories of masculinity” at the heart of archetypal approaches to gender (15). That is, Javid’s fulfilling passage into a “complete and virile Zoroastrian” manhood was earlier identified as an unparalleled



experience, since the universe was witness to that “galactic Iranian afternoon” when Javid was gloriously “recognized and identified” in this world (*SJ* 10, 241). Having evolved as an impenetrably idealistic and utopian conception of gender, Javid’s masculinity is resistant to change, and much less open to pro-feminist interpretations – in spite of his commitment to fight the forces of Ahriman manifest in the patriarchal figure of Malik-Ara. This particularly remains to be the case as Javid becomes more and more established as a national trope, and eventually emulates the shadow of Riza Khan’s masculine authority in actively partaking in avenging his family’s blood. In the end, treatment of femininity in *The Story of Javid* becomes the most problematic aspect of Fassih’s much-revered “*pisarak-i Irani*.”

The historical setting in *The Story of Javid* is the period of transition between 1921 to 1926, beginning with the coup d’état of Sayyid Ziya al-Din Tabataba’i and Riza Khan, and ending with the latter’s assumption of throne as Riza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941). In fact, the progression of plot is also signposted by key dates and events that mark the increasing authority of Riza Khan, and that eventually ascertain Malik-Ara’s downfall as the symbol of Qajar power. In his earlier days in Tehran, for instance, Javid would overhear that the Iranian capital “had found stability,” and that “a new government” was in place. The new War Minister Riza Khan, the narrator basks in victory, “was playing tough, scaring the Qajar Princes witless, and making them more cautious than ever” (*SJ* 62). Javid, it is noteworthy, watches the unfolding events in earnest, and keeps track of the changes underway (204).

The authoritarian, politically savvy, and at some level reformist image that Fassih wishes to convey of Riza Khan is on one level to undermine the pompous and apathetic Qajar state in which Javid is victimized. Overhearing the word on the street, the narrator echoes the voices content with the way the new Minister “had arrived to cut short the hands of the corrupt aristocracy, and the Princes who were leeching off the nation’s blood” (*SJ* 86). Equally important to my analysis is also the more implicit gendered

rhetoric promulgated, or more accurately taken to a new level, with the advent of Riza Khan to the Iranian nationalist discourse. Recognizing the impact of this new masculine authority is curiously informative to an understanding of Javid's conclusive actions in the novel, particularly since Fassih has consciously embedded the gradual rise of the first Pahlavi monarch in the dramatic structure of the narrative. This, I must forewarn, is not to romanticize Riza Shah's role in Fassih's moral imagination, but to suggest that Javid's eventual development from innocence to experience entails the performance of a hypermasculine—and eventually misogynistic—identity in tandem with the dominant vision of manhood reinforced throughout the 1920s (Najmabadi 128).

The inception of “significantly gendered discourses of nationalism in Iran during the later nineteenth century,” Joanna de Groot notes, were triggered by manifold “military defeats, loss of territory, and adverse treaty settlements” that revealed “the real deficiencies” of the Qajar rule in protecting Iran against colonial or internal threats (141). In words not strange to readers of *The Story of Javid*, de Groot's analysis indicates how Fassih has appropriated aspects of the Iranian nationalist discourse in recounting Javid's tragedy. With the growing influence of an image of Iran as a “land” in need of defence and protection, the “masculinity of nationalist projects,” de Groot notes, was “explicitly expressed in a range of bodily and emotive depictions which imaged the *vatan* as a wounded/sick patient or endangered/violated girl or mother requiring the medical care or chivalric devotion of patriotic male healers/lovers/sons” (144–45). Iran, in other words, was imagined as a “geobody” not simply defined through postcolonial cartographies, but more organically “envisaged as the outlines of a female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for” (Najmabadi 98). Javid, emulating the latent image of such masculine prototype aggressively manifest in the apparition of Riza Khan, is inscribed as a national trope whose eventual act of revenge over Malik-Ara reads as the patriotic protection of Iranian “land,” a female “geobody” poetically—but much reductively—aligned with a character such as Malik-

Ara's daughter Suraya, a close friend of Javid's, and a feminine symbol of Iran incarnate (to whom I shall return).

In her exegesis of a propaganda mural commissioned during Riza Khan's role as Minister of War, Afsaneh Najmabadi unearths layers of the work that also shed light on the impact of the Minister's masculinity on Fassih's imagination. In the mural, Riza Khan is represented "as the lion-man erect with his bare sword—soon to become the crowned father—supporting/holding up the feeble female mother-Iran" (95). The image glorifies the protective figure of the Minister at the centre, with the national logo of the lion and sun (*shir-u khwurshid*) at the top sandwiched between the national flag and an array of mostly pre-Islamic Persian kings (89). "So posing, standing fiercely with a sword in his right hand," Najmabadi observes, Riza Khan "resembles and becomes identified as the male lion—shirmard, the lion man." Just like "the national logo," she concludes, "there is a counter image to Riza Khan's masculinity" (89). The mural thus represents the protective masculinity of statehood, and the fragile femininity of the homeland, commemorating Riza Khan (later crowned the first Pahlavi Shah) as the "hypermuscular savior of a female vatan" (128).

Fassih has carefully contextualized the increasing contestation of Qajar rule throughout his novel with the plot beginning *in medias res* following Riza Khan's 1921 coup and ending with the War Minister turned Prime Minister crowned a Pahlavi King while Malik-Ara is abjectly (and symbolically) drowned in the cistern of his own palace. Ironically, it is Javid who, though traumatized and emasculated, acts in the latter half of the novel as a ruthless iron fist exacting revenge on the Prince. Indeed, the spirit of Javid's conflict with Malik-Ara in all its ultimately ruthless enmity towards the repressive Prince parallels the "structure of feeling" (Williams' term) in 1920s Iran conveyed through the hypermuscular authority that Riza Shah reinstated against the beleaguered Qajars. For instance, in a paragraph that opens with an account of Malik-Ara's undermined authority in the new regime, the narrator reflects Javid's careful watch over the Prince in partisan

terms such as “a vigilant male warrior,” who must “study his enemy,” before assault (SJ 205).

Thus militarizing Javid’s attitude, the narrator points at the inevitable direction of plot, and that of Javid’s development into a vengeful character. As if holding the “bare sword” of the new state apparatus, Javid wishes if “Riza Shah mustered the entirety of corrupt and decadent Qajar statesmen, and sent them all off into their ultimate and Ahrimanic demise” (SJ 253). Such resentful and unbending rhetoric on the part of Javid and the narrator, embedded at the heart of the novel’s dualistic cosmology, indicates how a terrible hypermasculine aggressiveness is performatively at work not just to avenge Javid’s loss of virility and livelihood, but also to reinstate his symbolic position as a national trope following his ordeals. If, then, Fassih’s archetypal vision of an original Iranian manhood has been subdued and shattered in catastrophe, it potentially returns in partisan form in tandem with the “hypermasculine savior” of an enfeebled Iran (Najmabadi 128). Concurrent with Malik-Ara’s waning political star, Javid thus regains his autonomy, takes matters into his own hands, and heads for revenge—even though the personal image of Riza Shah portrayed in the novel fails to deliver the promises made, even reaching a fleeting compromise with Malik-Ara (SJ 253).

Nevertheless, the mythopoeic ideal of masculinity initiated through Javid’s *Sidrih Pushan* characterizing the boy’s innocence and naïve defiance, develops following a chain of ordeals in Qajar Tehran into a much frustrated but resilient, vengeful, and combative performance of masculinity characterizing his experience and tortured defiance. Both conceptions of manhood, I have attempted to demonstrate, are in part shaped through the gendered discourses of nationalism that characterize the novel’s immediate context. While the initiation rite in Yazd followed by the road trip to Tehran established Javid’s image as an Iranian youth archetypically rooted in the “warm soil” of Iran (SJ 7), his encounter with Malik-Ara turns into an allegorical conflict with the politically bankrupt Qajar hegemony on account

of a manly and patriotic passion for the “geobody” of Iran. Yet in the end, what remains problematic is the femininity of this “geobody” particularly with regard to Fassih’s portrayal of female characters Suraya and Layla. In conclusion, I must note that a deeper component of Fassih’s construction of Javid as the original Iranian man is the boy’s problematic attitude towards Suraya and Layla as stereotyped representations—the former put on the pedestal as the last remnant of a decent “Iranian nature” in a Qajar age of darkness, the latter drowned in the cistern alongside Malik-Ara for exactly the opposite reason.

In the Preface, which at the outset of the novel proclaims Fassih’s will to celebrate Javid as an Iranian trope, Suraya is the only character whose name comes up alongside Malik-Ara. As a device to accentuate the apologetic tone of the Preface, Suraya is the means to point out that the battle between Javid and Malik-Ara is not a clash of religions but one of attitude. Malik-Ara’s daughter, therefore, is a point in case since she is “the only genuine and pious Muslim” in the novel, and a woman whose “sincere efforts to look after Javid” will cost her dearly (*SJ* viii). Fassih’s “chaste Suraya” is a quasi-Victorian image of femininity whose ability not just to protect Javid but also to save the novel from the censor’s scissors is much appreciated. In his overview of Fassih’s corpus, Ali Ferdowsi concurs with some commentators who find Fassih’s “portrayals of women as often vulnerable and prone to victimization, suicide and murder.” However, Ferdowsi does note, and my own reading of Fassih’s other works confirms, that many of these women are urbane, professional, and are often granted respect and sexual agency. If so, then the women portrayed in *The Story of Javid* are the least agential of Fassih’s representations of femininities as none can ever articulate their stories beyond the shadow of Javid’s expressive masculinity.

While protecting the “geobody” of Iran, Javid’s respect for Suraya, his only true friend in Tehran and a symbol of “human decency” (*SJ* 79), turns gradually into an obsessive preoccupation to guard the woman’s honor and

chastity against Malik-Ara's tyrannical patriarchy. Javid's reaction to the rumors surrounding Suraya's pregnancy is a telling example of how a legitimate concern for the plight of a friend intertwines with a discourse of Iranianness and becomes, quite reductively, an expression of benevolent sexism and hypermasculinity ruing the violation of "Miss Suraya, a Virgin Mary in her own right" (208). Reduced to the totalizing femininity of Iranian land in need of protection against a Qajar patriarchy, Suraya's character reads as a vehicle to salvage Javid's sexual honor, and a proxy for Fassih to highlight the national heroism of his protagonist. By the same token, any potential for a feminist undertone in the novel is subdued in the denouement with the distressing—and somewhat unfair—destiny of Layla, Javid's wife. The ultimate figure of battered womanhood, Layla becomes entangled in Javid's nest of intrigue after he finally corners the fugitive Malik-Ara in a cistern, and decides to drown him. Having been coerced into taking sides with the Prince following a fleeting affair, Layla becomes a wanton incarnate in Javid's mind, and the obvious target of his eventual wrath, hence murdered next to Malik-Ara.

It may therefore not be as easy to characterize Javid's quest as that of a moral triumph as some have misleadingly suggested (Ujakyans 106), since Fassih has unwittingly complicated the dualistic cosmology of the novel that has thus far demarcated Javid's noble cause from Malik-Ara's evil treachery. After murdering Malik-Ara and Layla, for instance, Javid looks "up the sky, which was a clear blue. And smiled. Whatever he had been told of the pure faith [of Zoroastrianism] was true" (*SJ* 378). Reading these closing lines, which no doubt complete Javid's revenge-tragedy, is almost as disturbing as Layla's own dismal fate, for it is not the "clear blue" of the sky only to which Javid is a divine witness. One must not overlook the pool of blood he has filled as a coffin for Layla—a woman no less a victim than Suraya in the patriarchal society of Qajar Tehran. The epic triumph upon the narrative closure is a morally ambiguous one as *The Story of Javid* fails at the pressing issue of addressing the other half of the population on "the warm soil" of

Iran (7), that is, women who do not necessarily exemplify (Suraya) or erode (Layla) the last remnant of a decent “Iranian nature” (79).

As for Javid, who, we have been meant to believe, does embody an inherent sense of Iranianness, enactment of masculinity is more problematic than at first blush. In fact, the treatment of gender in *The Story of Javid*, though idealistic and poetic in sensibility, is too grossly at odds with the everydayness of Iranian experience. From as early as the Arcadian days in Yazd well through violent days in Riza Shah’s Tehran, Javid’s aestheticized masculinity is the manifestation of what Connell terms “gender archetype” as opposed to “gender identity” (14). Fassih is, in other words, more inclined to naturalize an inherent sense of Iranianness than envision a fully humanized character conceived in flesh and blood. In truth, Javid is a symbolic representation whose masculinity is as romanticized as his practice of Zoroastrianism—to the effect of countering a Qajar hegemony that hampers, in all its moral and political bankruptcy, the fulfillment of an original Iranian manhood.

### Chapter Summary

I finally maintain that Javid’s status as the original Iranian man is archetypically gendered and aesthetically embedded in a landed celebration of *vatan* or homeland—on “the warm soil of the plains of Iran (SJ 7). In it, the narrator and us readers by invitation reflect on Fassih’s panegyric on a pre-Islamic national trope that implements an impeccable idea of Iranianness. Setting the narrative, rather symbolically, against the backdrop of the transitional decade of 1920s when the decadent Qajars were giving way to the iron fists of Pahlavi nationalism, Fassih has interwoven the setting of the narrative with the more contested moment of the novel in 1981 postrevolutionary Iran, which is highlighted in the fictional Preface. In a manner of speaking, then, *The Story of Javid* is a literary production with a political unconscious and global awareness spanning back from the Pahlavi

period (1925–1979) to its moments of inception after the Islamic Revolution (1979).

Significantly, Fassih's markedly pre-Islamic nostalgia for ancient Iranian history provides an interesting ground for the comparative retrieval of the untold story of Melville's Fedallah, which I have termed a "proleptic narrative." To reiterate, Melville and Fassih have both been influenced by particularly European grand narratives of pre-Islamic Iranian history, the former in nineteenth-century New York, and the latter in twentieth-century Tehran. Melville draws on a much "generalized" body of Orientalism recycled during the epoch of American Renaissance, namely through his portrayal of Fedallah, in order to "reinforce his essentially pessimistic worldview" (Versluis 124). Back in Iran, Fassih approaches Orientalist conceptions of ancient Iranian history from a different angle. Revisiting the late nineteenth-century frenzy of his nationalist predecessors for a pre-Islamic form of "archaism," inspired originally by such European fabrications as "the Aryan myth" (Zia-Ebrahimi "Self-Orientalization 447–49), Fassih rehistoricizes a less ideologically charged trope of nationalism while characterizing his protagonist. Yet apart from their divergent genealogies, because Javid is a combative figure who is resistant to domestic tyranny much like the Parsee's own opposition to the demonizing forces of Ishmael's narrative, his passage from Yazd to Tehran can resonate in terms of Fedallah's own journey from Gujarat to Nantucket. Unlike Fedallah, of course, Javid is granted the opportunity, more evident in Fassih's Preface than anywhere else, to articulate a story of survival in the form of the novel that is *The Story of Javid*, an opening chapter to Fedallah's "proleptic narrative."

Fassih's celebration of his protagonist as an exemplar of Iranian masculinity may, therefore, be an echo of Fedallah's tall tale. This is particularly the case given the fact that *The Story of Javid* is a historical novel that encapsulates, following Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, a distinctly territorial and inward-looking "frontier drama" staged at the heart of Iranian



discourses of nationalism (102). I have rephrased this as Fassih's *landed* rendition of Iran, and have proposed that it should potentially counter Ishmael's *seaward* narrative of Americanness. *Moby-Dick* does, as many concur, exemplify a statement on the nineteenth-century nationalist ideology of Manifest Destiny (Paul Rogin, Gifra-Adroher), which Melville has critically revisited on his whaling vessel. Having said that, Fedallah, whose voice is strategically muffled in order for Ishmael to articulate his expansionist narrative of survival, is able despite all odds to speak up against the grain of the narrative by pleading with Ahab to "Take another pledge" (MD 555), and eventually subvert Ishmael's rhetorical move. By the same token, to summon my issues with conceptions of World Literature, juxtaposing *The Story of Javid* (and *Missing Soluch* in the next chapter) with *Moby-Dick* is also an attempt, not unlike Fedallah's, to articulate a "proleptic narrative" rooted in Persian *Adab*, a literary tradition that is falsely posited at the periphery of a master-text such as Melville's. In a sense, then, the landed concerns of Fassih discussed in this chapter can—as productively opposed to Jamesonian "*national allegories*"—debunk the seaward expansion of *Moby-Dick* onto textual and scholarly fronts, from expansive contemplations on Manifest Destiny to the imperial will during the Cold War to occupy buffer zones.

In a focus on Dowlatabadi's Mergan in the next chapter, I will rise above the nineteenth-century context of *Moby-Dick*, and transcend reflections of Fedallah and Javid as merely pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian figurations. Since the Cold War era, and well into our open-ended present, *Moby-Dick* has been resurrected to a new canonical status as a "world text." Countering this requires a more nuanced externalization of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" in order to more effectively resonate the autonomy of his Persian literary counterparts against the inequalities within the "world literary system." *The Story of Javid*, as I suggested in the analysis above, falls short in this effort since it registers sites of violence with regard to female characters, and perpetuates their silence in complicity. In other words, Javid as the manifestation of an "original Iranian manhood" is on the same boat with

Ishmael, the exemplar of an “immaculate” American “manliness,” since both are unwittingly involved in subduing the otherwise articulate voices of Suraya and Fedallah respectively. On that account, introducing Javid as Fedallah’s immediate kin in Persian *Adab* is indeed pathbreaking but far from sufficient. Building on conclusions from the second chapter, namely that Fedallah is a defiant outcast as opposed to the Orientalist misreadings of his mid-century critics, I will hereafter argue that Dowlatabadi’s Mergan is the final embodiment of the Parsee’s “proleptic narrative.” As a unique representation of femininity by an Iranian male novelist, Mergan will resist the interlocking politics of patriarchy in Zaminej, defy national policies of land reform mechanically imposed from Tehran, and debunk the global politics of the Cold War predominating the Iranian scene during the 1960s. Consequently, in a critical endeavor that I term “Call Her Mergan,” the woman will rearticulate Fedallah’s voice *past* the masculine dogma of Fassih, *beyond* the textual violence of Melville, and *against* the canonical establishment of *Moby-Dick* as a “world text” and the Persian novel itself as World Literature.

## Chapter 4

### Call Her Mergan: Breaking the Silence of *Missing Soluch*

And here I am. A lone woman facing a cold season,  
About to perceive the tainted existence of land;  
And the simple but sad sorrow of sky,  
And the impotence of these cemented hands.

Furuq Farukhzad, "Believe the Dawn of the Cold Season."

#### Binding a Proleptic Narrative

From the journey across "the lone Atlantic" (*MD* 135), to "the warm soil of the plains of Iran" (*SJ* 7), we now arrive at a stretch of wilderness known as "God's Land" in Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch*. Surrounding the fictional village of Zaminej in eastern Iran during the mid-twentieth-century, and providing a puny source of income for a rural woman named Mergan, "God's Land" is to begin with a wastelandish terrain wherein "the sands gathered together" to form the illusion of freehold for the landless laborer (*MS* 218). But more importantly, it is the site and sight upon which the protagonist speaks up and articulates her existence against locally patriarchal, nationally tyrannical, and globally neocolonial circumstances that delimit her experiences. In fact, reading the story of her struggles, I can palpably imagine that Mergan, already excluded from the society's established structures for political representation, manifests a defiant disposition across "God's Land" which rhymes with that of Fedallah, a fellow outcast and the quintessential subaltern who similarly attempts to break the deadlock against Ishmael's epistemological supremacy.

It is interesting that when I met with Dowlatabadi in Tehran to conduct an interview in the summer of 2013, and introduced to him my idea of a conversation between Melville's Fedallah and his protagonist, his first reaction was: "Mergan, too, has Zoroastrian origins." The name Mergan is derived from the word "*Mihrgan*," a pre-Islamic ceremony held between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of the Solar Hijri month of Mehr (during October). While

ancient Iranians believed that God had laid out the earth and breathed life onto it during "*Mihrgan*" (Abdi 12), they also venerated the occasion because it marked a more significant mytho-historical event. As the likes of historian Muhammad bin-Jarir al-Tabari and scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni noted in the fourth and fifth centuries SH (tenth and eleventh AD), *Mihrgan* was the day of glory when Firaydun the legendary King of Pishdadi descent and Kavih the heroic Blacksmith triumphed over the oppressive ruler Zahhak, and chained the tyrant to Mount Damavand (Azizyan 20). Of course, having already introduced Fassih's Javid as Fedallah's immediate kin in Iranian fiction, it is no longer my intention to extend Dowlatabadi's cordial compliment to my work as yet another archaic and religious parallel to Melville's Parsee. But considering Mergan's confrontation with varied sites of oppression, it is notable that naming the protagonist after a mythopoeic opposition between the victorious forces of good and the vicious power of evil foreshadows the struggle that begins, much like Fedallah's, with the very opening sentence of the novel as she realizes that her husband has abandoned the family:

Mergan raised her head from the pillow. Soluch was gone. Her children were fast asleep – Abbas, Abrau, and Hajer. (8)

There are, needless to say, generic, spatial, and temporal disparities that render a potential analogy between Mergan and Fedallah highly improbable. It is not only the cosmic distance between nineteenth-century New England and twentieth-century Khurasan that separates two literary worlds; differences in gender, social customs, and structure of family life may position the two narratives as diametrically opposed. For instance, whereas the abrupt departure of Soluch begins the domino effect of Mergan's ordeals in *Zaminej*, the fact that Ahab, a married man, has spent more than three decades of his life on sea is unabashedly normalized as the de facto politics of masculinity in Nantucket. Nonetheless, in light of the fact that Fedallah and Mergan are both outcasts that strive to defy their seemingly ordained

fates, arriving at the specifics of comparison between *Moby-Dick* and *Missing Soluch* is not far-fetched but far-reaching.

First of all, considering the distinction between a rural novel and a whaling adventure, both appear as attempts to destabilize burgeoning metropolitan centres. In his formative *Letters from an American Farmer* published in 1782, a text that predates much of Melville's socio-political concerns in the nineteenth-century, John de Crevecoeur speaks of whaling as a remarkable form of farming. As James, de Crevecoeur's fictional farmer addressing his English interlocutor, "endeavour[s] to trace our society from the sea to our woods!" (99), he boasts that the profession has forged "bold and enterprising" Americans who often happen to "live two-thirds of their time" in pursuit of the leviathan (87, 197). Decades later in New York, it may well be that Melville's dramatization of Ishmael's escape from the "insular city of Manhattoes" to redefine his manhood (Leverenz 85; *MD* 25) was also a flight from the emergent metropolitan core of the eastern coast by way of a regional statement on behalf of the Nantucket whaler. By somewhat the same token, Dowlatabadi's rendition of village affairs in literature is often described as an escape in creative terms from the hustle and bustle of "city life" into "Iran's countryside" (Talatoff 71). Given that a chain of watersheds in rural developments, namely the John F. Kennedy-encouraged land reform program of the 1960s, led to a restructuring of regional landscape throughout Iran (Hooglund ix), Mergan's embeddedness in "God's Land" is a timely act of representation that falls outside the purview of the nationalist window into Tehran, the urban capital of the country, which has chiefly been represented in my thesis through Fassih's *The Story of Javid*.

Of course, to return to de Crevecoeur as a further point of reference, the attitude of the American farmer towards his land, and by extension that of the whaler towards his game differs from Dowlatabadi's agricultural laborer on an originally ideological level. James's commitment to cherish his "land" is what he calls "the only philosophy of an American farmer" (60). Along with the settler who has "cross[ed] the Atlantic to realise that

happiness," he notes that American soil is what "feeds, it clothes us, from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink, the very honey of our bees comes from this" (ibid). Admittedly, proof of Mergan's own passion for agriculture is equally scattered all over *Zaminej*. Remembering a bygone era of bliss, the narrator conjures up a harvest season when Mergan first fell in love while gleaning after the harvesting Soluch. "As a sign of his love," we are told in idyllic excess, "Mergan had to return from the fields with her arms full of wheat" (MS 124). Even so, besides the sacred terra firma endearingly shared in both works, there are distant valleys to cross once we turn to the repercussions that de Crevecoeur's pre-Revolutionary reflections bear on Melville's treatment of the ideology of Manifest Destiny and, by Ishmael's extension, the never-told story of Fedallah.

In search of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" in Iranian fiction in the long aftermath of the events of August 1953, I have already shed light on the definitive contrast between the *outward* (that is, expansionist) course of Ishmael's narrative across the ocean, and the *inward* (or protective) rootedness of Javid and Mergan in conceptions of Iranian land. On Melville's side of the spectrum, as he crafts and delivers Fedallah's silence to twentieth-century readers of *Moby-Dick*, the American whaler combs the ocean as if "the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires" (MD 91). Much in the spirit of their eighteenth-century fellow, who in de Crevecoeur's words took over the "formerly rude soil" and toiled frontier after frontier until it "established all our rights...our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants" (60), Melville's Nantucketers also evoke the Puritan colonization of New World preceding the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. As Ishmael notes in a daring statement of civic and national pride, "Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada" for, over and above, "two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's" (MD 91). In comparison, as opposed to Ishmael's bold spirit of adventure, which I have perceived as a narrative of survival at the expense of Fedallah's right to narrate, Mergan's landed ambition is a far less enterprising and far more

radical phenomenon on Dowlatabadi's part of the debate. Despite the ironic sanctity of the term "God's Land," Mergan's pledge to insulate her property is neither an effort to conquer resources nor an attempt to sparkle a *City upon a Hill* following the biblical discourse of American exceptionalism paramount in both Melville and de Crevecoeur.

Rather, Mergan's originality lies in her resolve to sit-in and protest the course of an Iranian *land rush*, as it were, which sought to bring about a class of petty proprietors into the rural scene to strengthen national authority (Ansari 160). Seen from this historical angle, Mergan's anti-establishment protection of "God's Land" is not an act of colonization but indeed an expression of resistance as she endeavors, against the grain of James and Ishmael's imperial will, to define her character within the space that she so defiantly occupies. In other words, compared to her two counterparts in American literature, Mergan is rather inclined towards the Native Americans who remain ambiguously compliant in James's letters, and more in tune with the multi-ethnic mariners of the *Pequod* that are eternally marooned in Ishmael's narrative. Therefore, as I seek to accompany Fedallah to Mergan's doorstep, it is through secular projections of territorial land rather than sacred projects of expansion that Mergan will vocalize the ultimate embodiment of Fedallah's untold story. As to why it is Mergan, rather than Javid, who finally mirrors Fedallah's image in my selection of Iranian texts, I must note that if the *defiant disposition* of an *outcast subject* is the matching credential, then Fassih's Javid as a Persian supremacist representation of Iranian masculinity predicated on a highly gendered discourse of nationalism is, as concluded in the previous chapter, more identified with the oppressor Ishmael than with the oppressed Fedallah.

Aligning the proto-regional *Moby-Dick* with the canonically-rural *Missing Soluch* following John de Crevecoeur's trail is an attempt to find common ground to bind Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." I hereby propose and will further demonstrate that Mergan is a representation of rural femininity distinctive to the corpus of Persian fiction produced by men, as

well as a significant addition to the existing body of feminist fiction by Iranian women. As such, Mergan's resilience in opposing interlocking sites of physical and epistemic violence within and beyond the grasp of her narrator will reflect Fedallah's own efforts to whisper his account of the journey despite the punishing odds of Ishmael's narrative. Furthermore, from the analytical perspective that unfolds across the following literary maps and more extensively in the next section, Mergan's textually delivered strength to defy domestic tyranny and global inequalities in the realm of aesthetics will—comparatively and, thus, potentially—rescue Fedallah of a passive subalternity ossified from within the world of *Moby-Dick* onto the geopolitically charged space of Melville criticism.

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 1. "The Voyage of the Pequod," illustrated by Everett Henry; Library of Congress

The above rendition of the *Pequod's* journey by Everett Henry (Figure 1) is a good example of a literary map at the most decorative level that hides and conceals my textual and comparative concerns. While the Library of Congress holding the artefact claims that such maps "record the location of places associated with authors and their literary works or serve as a guide to their imaginative worlds," this particular portrayal of Ishmael's narrative can hardly reveal the inequalities the voyage has condoned along its course. Portraying the vessel as a factory at full throttle, Henry manifests the productivity of the mission, the crew's spirit of camaraderie, and most significantly the tragic will power of Ahab at the focal point of the map. As for the captain's Parsee mate, apart from the coincidental presence of Ahab's body with the background fire and smoke blocking the entire surface of West Asia from view, there is no reference to indicate Fedallah's subdued presence, let alone reveal an analogy to trace the character's contemporary presence on the map.

Remapping a variation of Henry's work on the watermark of the Cold War-torn *Moby-Dick* (Figure 2), I now suggest that a comparative



cartography of Ishmael's voyage as pertaining to both Fedallah and Mergan foregrounds a revealing intertextual dynamic. In his quantitative approaches to Comparative Literature, Franco Moretti argues that literary maps "possess 'emerging' qualities" that disclose "*more than the sum of their parts*" (GMT 53). In our particular juxtaposition of two literary worlds from two distinct cultural, temporal, and spatial zones, a map can "*reduce the text[s] to a few elements, and abstract them from the narrative flow*" until—"with a little luck"—they construct "a model of the narrative universe which...may bring some hidden patterns to the surface" (53–54). In effect, a dialogue between Dowlatabadi's *landed* and Melville's *seaward* narratives will uncover an alternative space wherein Mergan emerges—as a resourceful woman, creative artisan, uncompromising laborer, and irrepressible protagonist—to articulate Fedallah's voice within the world of Persian *Adab*.

Titled "Fedallah and Mergan," my map is not centred on Moby Dick like the oval-framed leviathan of Henry's work, but rather weds the otherwise distant narratives of Fedallah and Mergan across the Indian Ocean. What the entwined characters poignantly share is the disappearance of their narrative spaces deep into the "ocean" and "land" of the geographies imagined by Melville and Dowlatabadi. On the west side of the story, Fedallah remains bereft of the chance to speak due to Ishmael's power to gloss over alternative accounts of his destiny, not to mention the critical edge of Cold War Americanists who built on the "Anglo-Saxon image of Melville" to celebrate Ishmael's liberalism "against the dangers presented by the [foreign] masses" (Lauter 6). On the east side of the affair, moreover, there is Mergan who, functioning as an agricultural laborer, is deprived of the right to claim "God's Land" as Dowlatabadi seeks both to expose the violence inflicted on women in a ruthlessly patriarchal community and dramatize the unforeseen consequences of a nationally and internationally imposed land reform program (qtd. in Qurbani 145–48).

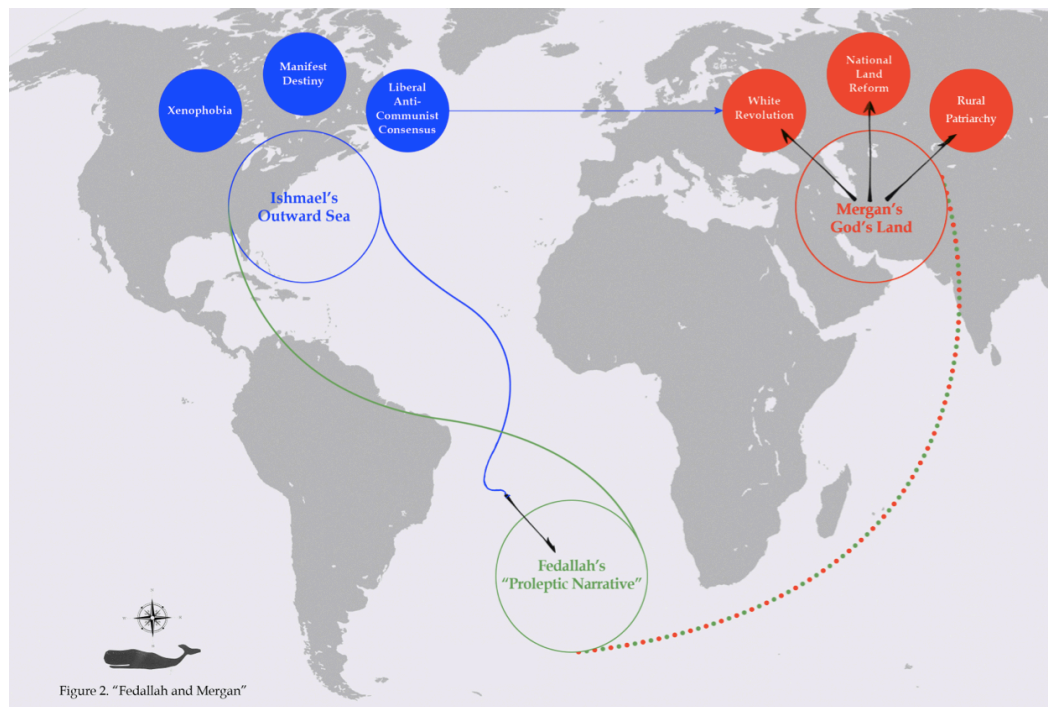


Figure 2. "Fedallah and Mergan," illustrated by Sepideh Gandomi

As to what bonds Fedallah to Mergan, I reiterate that if the Parsee's imagined story, or "proleptic narrative," has remained limited only to my intervention into the Canon of American literature, the sustained account of Mergan's defiance across and beyond "God's Land" has been textually inscribed within the fabric of Iranian fiction. Therefore, if Fasih's Javid, as a Yazdi Zoroastrian of the same ancestral (pre-Islamic Persia) and representational (European Orientalism) roots as Fedallah addressed the nineteenth-century context of the text, the contemporary figure of Mergan will correct Fedallah's image against the more canonical backdrop of the Cold War. What I am suggesting with regard to the blue arrow of my map crossing the Atlantic from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch* is that Mergan's radical stance towards the exploitation of resources in Zaminej also collides with a series of cosmetic reforms known as the White Revolution in Iran. Given that land reform, as part of this nationwide program, was informed by the Cold War climate that had orchestrated the 1953 coup and encouraged rapid social developments throughout the 60s to insure the "containment" of the Soviet threat (Hooglund 47), Mergan's defiance not only of patriarchal but also neocolonial forces is indeed a silver lining. That is, a hopeful

prospect to dismantle misreadings of Fedallah as the devil incarnate of the atemporal *Moby-Dick* of the twentieth-century, a “weapon in the Cold War” (Pease “AS” 137).

Synthesizing the worlds of Mergan’s “God’s Land” and Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” in this chapter, it is my argument that the former is an already-materialized site of defiance that gives substance to the only-imagined space of the latter. Accordingly, I shall view Mergan as a “defiant subject” (to be theorized through Hamid Dabashi’s critique of the postcolonial condition) for whom “art” as opposed to “anticolonial ideologies” is “the singular site of resisting de-subjection and restoring agency to the colonially ravaged subject” (MAL 109). I thereby maintain that realms of Persian *Adab* and American literature—when unshackled from such taxonomic categories as Western cores and Oriental peripheries, “world texts” and “*national allegories*”—bring to the fore an alternative space where the literary act, and the aesthetic as political, facilitate cross-cultural exchange in equal terms. In fact, just as I previously pushed the boundaries of Melville criticism to accommodate the compromised “Take” of Fedallah’s “Take another pledge” as outwitting the “Call” of Ishmael’s opening “Call me Ishmael” (MD 24, 555), so will the potential coalescence of the Parsee’s whispered story with Mergan’s cry of dissent finally put an end to his hundred years of solitude.

Highlighting the passage on my literary map across the Indian Ocean, Mergan’s defiance of local and global inequalities in Zaminej is the bridge to firstly cross the *inward* land of Dowlatabadi’s moral imagination and, more urgently, transcend the *outward* sea of Ishmael’s fantasies of expansion. A resourceful woman who defeats “Soluch’s empty spot” (MS 12), a creative artisan who redeems her fellow villagers by “whitewashing” their charcoaled walls (248), an uncompromising laborer who occupies “God’s Land” as a public space to oppose her oppressors (421), and ultimately an irrepressible protagonist who resists her narrator’s efforts to sanctify her femininity as only the “guardian” of land (381), Mergan is the “defiant

subject” to summon up the long overdue story of her fellow outcast, the Parsee Fedallah. If, then, as Moretti maintains, literary maps are sites upon which “the real and the imaginary coexist in varying, often elusive proportions” (GMT 64), my trans-temporal fusion of two texts against the backdrop of the worlds that made them possible will vocalize a “proleptic narrative” beyond curatorial endeavors that compartmentalize literary traditions from, in our case, North America to West Asia.

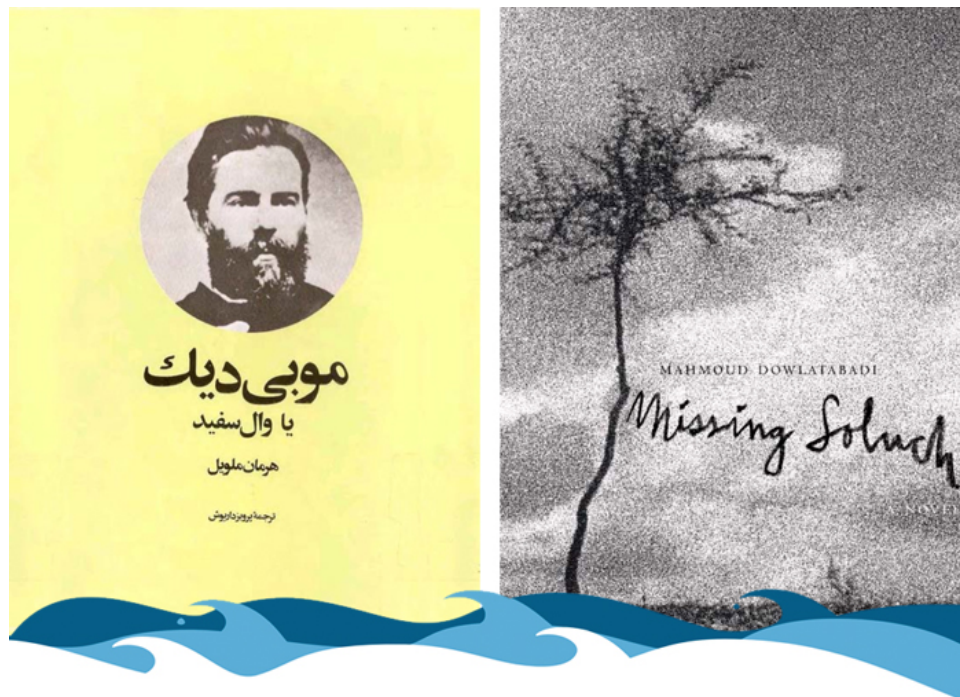


Figure 3. Translations of *Moby-Dick* and *Missing Soluch*, illustrated by Gandomi

Eventually, in light of the prophetic disposition of Fedallah’s character to foretell beyond Ishmael’s narrative reach, and given Mergan’s empowered position to de-territorialize readings of *Missing Soluch* and *Moby-Dick*, the humanizing effects that flow with the dialogue are of great consequence. Following my on-going critique of National and World Literatures, it is possible that the relocation of Fedallah’s tall tale through Mergan’s field of vision will reignite the interest of the world reader beyond the blind-spots of Orientalism and market capitalism which, as noted in the first chapter, predominate the institution of World Literature. If, for instance, my reading

of Mergan's heroic struggles may inspire the Persian-speaking reader towards Parviz Daryush's translation of *Moby-Dick* on the more fluid flow of literary exchange, I am certain the conversation will also benefit the English-speaking reader in more emancipating ways. Not only may the reader revisit Melville to seek Fedallah, s/he may also come across Kamran Rastegar's translation of *Missing Soluch* without the exhaustive urge to situate Dowlatabadi's "Iran," the contested geopolitical space within the so-called Middle East, into the "world literary system" (Figure 3).

### Retrieving a Defiant Subject

*Missing Soluch* is the account of a rural woman's struggle to survive in the climatically harsh and socially hostile environment of Zaminej in the eastern region of Khurasan. The protagonist Mergan, mother of three, wakes up one morning to realize that her husband Soluch has left, and that she is responsible to look after the family on her own. Immediately faced by the stark reality of being a single-mother in a patriarchal society, Mergan begins to deal with a series of interconnected ordeals. At home, her two teenaged sons Abbas and the more ambitious Abrau begin to compete for manly authority so as to fill "the empty place of Soluch" (to quote the verbatim translation of the novel's title, *jay-i khali-yi Suluch*). Mergan's ensuing efforts to maintain her stance against her sons, as well as to protect her youngest daughter Hajer, is her first challenge to face Soluch's disappearance. Outside home, furthermore, Mergan is an agricultural laborer known in the novel as "*aftab nishin*" [sunward squatter] (JS 91), whose livelihood is contingent on the seasonal availability of work. Obviously enough, the fates of Mergan and her children very much depend on Zaminej society at large.

Yet Zaminej itself is a village in transition. Having undergone a nationwide program of reform to alter the distribution of land between absentee landlords and sharecropping peasants, old and new forces are pulling the community apart. Since absentee landlords have left for good, lesser landowners such as Mirza Hassan attempt to profit from the

destabilized community; and proponents of the old regime like Karbalai Doshanbe rue the past and try to oppose winds of change. Both sides, of course, dispute to the detriment of wretched laborers who no longer have enough resources to sustain their lives. Forced either to migrate (Soluch) or alternatively stay to suffer (Mergan), such characters emerge as the most immediate victims of economic hardship, class bias, and gender violence in the world of the narrative. Women, in particular, are most vulnerable as the critical lens of Dowlatabadi's third-person narrator focalizes the story of three—Mergan, Hajer, and Raghiyeh—as the most poignant cases of pain and distress. In a catastrophic chain of events that form the plot, a group of landowners led by Mirza Hassan decide to wrest the barren fields of “God's Land” away from the laborers, and start a government-funded pistachio project. Caught off guard, and helpless against the corrupt politician-patriarchs of Zaminej, Mergan realizes that her life is falling to pieces. Not only do the competing forces of old and new Zaminej exhaust her teenaged sons, she is even forced—out of hunger and desperation—to marry Hajer off to a fellow laborer Ali Genav, a misogynist who has harassed and violently injured his first wife Raghiyeh.

Against such ghastly state of affairs that seem naturalistic on the surface, Dowlatabadi foregrounds Mergan as a resourceful artisan, independent mother, and defiant woman whose survival instincts grant the narrative with an implicit sense of hope. Determined from the first page to break free of the yoke of the title-character Soluch, Mergan takes matters into her own hands and moves on with her life. Not relying on any of the patriarchs, be it the village chief Kadkhoda Norouz or her potential suitor Karbalai Doshanbe, she resists their overbearing presence, and tries to protect her premises. And though she does not succeed all the time, her determination is empowering enough. On a personal level, for instance, Mergan cannot bear to see the likes of the creditor Salar looting the remains of her property, and cannot stand to remain helpless against the sexual advances of her son's employer Sardar. On a more collective level, she cannot remain silent as the manipulative landowners colonize “God's Land,”

and exploit the laborers' slight source of income; and eventually she cannot choose to stay in Zaminej and remain a victim of the national government's ill-fated reforms. When Mergan finally decides to migrate to seek employment in the more urbanized regions of Iran, her attitude is that of an independent, pragmatist, and passionately confident woman who needs to assert her autonomy against hostile odds. Even the emblematic mirage of a homecoming Soluch, marking the close of *Missing Soluch*, cannot distort the course of Mergan's journey. Walking past a dismantled tractor, stepping over the blood of a slain camel, and leaving Zaminej in a symbolic denouement, Mergan ventures "like fate into the lone" desert of Khurasan—to conjure up Ishmael's description of his own cross-Atlantic voyage in *Moby-Dick* (135).

Attempting to recast the idea of World Literature through site-specific cases in American literature and Persian *Adab*, I have so far occupied "a location," following Hamid Dabashi, "that is neither in the East nor in the West, but on a critical geography that de-centres the planet without reversing its dominant order in cross-essentializing terms" (*PO* 139). As the first chapter demonstrated, Dabashi makes his case for such "new organicity" by way of a conversation with Edward Said's "defiant insistence on (what he would later call 'democratic) humanism'" on the right hand, and Gayatri Spivak's "postcolonial critique of post-structuralism" on the left (134). The point being made is that whereas both critics have heroically defined the revolutionary ethos of postcolonial and subaltern studies through secular criticism and postmodern anti-humanism respectively, neither is sufficiently and productively detached from that "European Sovereign Subject" at the heart of the abstraction they call "the West," which Said wishes to correct and Spivak seeks to dismantle (138). In other words, while Spivak's scholarship is "metaphorically fixated in a peripheral 'East'" to the extent "that she cannot but authenticate the white European intellectuals and the sovereign subject they think they have dismantled" (129), Said is equally entrenched in "an us-and-a-them axis that ipso facto has to accommodate the slanted relation of power between the European Subject and the unnamed

subjects of the Other of Europe" (136). Thus proposing to transcend the white, masculine, and Euro-American "interlocutor" of Spivak and Said, Dabashi builds a bridge between the duo, and instead calls for "a recasting of the world map" wherein "local geographies"—like Spivak's India and Said's Palestine—give birth to new and liberating potentials. Such will be the already actualized, articulated, and envisioned "polylocality of our historical exigencies, the polyvocality of our voices, and the polyfocality of our visions" manifest, mainly, in the realm of arts and literature (145). Then, and only then, Dabashi insists and I have demonstrated across the literary map above (Figure 2), will Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" be the rhetorical manifestation of her power against "patriarchal subject-constitution" and "imperialist object-formation" (PO 126).

Having envisioned my study of three characters Fedallah, Javid, and Mergan between two literary traditions, I have mapped my search for Fedallah's "proleptic narrative" from a de-centred and de-territorialized perspective through which neither American literature nor Persian *Adab* are placed at the periphery or centre of any "republic of letters." Such reductive designations as "core" and "periphery" embody a Euro-American will to power that hides and conceals the worldliness of literary productions through, in our case, the distortion of *Moby-Dick* into an imperial "world text" or the reduction of *Missing Soluch* to peripheral World Literature. Therefore, as I arrive at the plight of Mergan in *Zaminej*, it will be following her resilient struggle against local, national, and global inequalities that I find a parallel to Fedallah's subdued voice. In other words, it is by virtue of her creative birth in the world of Persian *Adab*, without assuming a position East or West of *Moby-Dick*, that Mergan (as Javid before her) rejuvenates Fedallah's voice in the coming pages. Within that process, as I stand by Mergan and Fedallah and listen to their stories, there will be no "white Euro-American interlocutor" to inform or distort the speech act—be it the authorial Melville or the narrative Ishmael.



In fact, in his follow-up critique of post-colonialism, Dabashi pursues his debate with Spivak and Said to finally arrive at the empowering figure of a “defiant subject” – whom I seek to ascribe to the literature of Mahmoud Dowlatabadi and, in particular, the character of Mergan. Before resting his case, Dabashi reminds us of “two fundamentally different” yet “ultimately related” predicaments that Said and Spivak have dealt with throughout their scholarships (*PO* 169). In the case of Edward Said, it is his “humanistic” faith in a Cartesian “sovereign, knowing subject” that makes his work “representational” along the lines of traditional humanism, quite ironically “at a time that he was criticizing representation[s]” of the so-called Orient (157). According to Dabashi, Said’s insistence on a “democratic criticism” of humanism, which is resolved to be less Eurocentric and more inclusive, does simultaneously account for the triumph of a political project on the one hand, and the failure of a theoretical undoing on the other. In other words, Said’s “stubborn humanism,” proclaimed in his final Preface to *Orientalism* (xxiii), fails to transcend the “position of servitude to the European sovereign subject,” but triumphs through a lifetime of “political activism” with regard to his stance on the question of Palestine (165–67).

By almost the same token, Gayatri Spivak’s postmodern anti-humanism is for Dabashi a dubious stance when it comes to the predicament of the postcolonial subject. While her post-structuralist critique of the “sovereignty of the knowing subject” has rightly pulled the rug from under the feet of critics who seek to represent the subaltern, the ensuing dilemma is simply paralyzing (*PO* 160). That is, whether or not the subalternists represent the oppressed, they are doomed in either attempt for if they do, “they are essentializing” brown women and men against their white oppressors, and if they do not, “they are remaining silent in light of unconscionable atrocities” (161). What is more, Spivak’s subsequent notion of “strategic essentialism,” which is employed to sustain her successful political activism despite her theoretical deconstruction of the very same cause (“Subaltern Studies” 13), is in Dabashi’s judgement destined to relapse into the unresolved problem of “the sovereign subject” and its exclusive will

to knowledge “into colonial domains” (PO 163). In a way, then, not unlike Said’s involvement with “democratic criticism,” Spivak is equally trapped in her attempts “to rescue the (European) knowing subject” for her own benefit, “and liberate it for historical agency in a global act of emancipation” (171).

Dabashi’s point here, to reiterate, is not a return to the white, masculine, and Euro-American “interlocutor” of *Orientalism* or “Can the Subaltern Speak?” but, perforce, a closer look at the “defiant subject” manifest in both works, whose significance surpasses the theoretical underpinnings that fail to reflect his or her authority. Dwelling in-between Said’s project of rescuing European humanism and Spivak’s attempt to deconstruct it before giving the subaltern a voice is, accordingly, “a defiant subject that they have left *theoretically under-theorized*, at the very same time that they themselves have *politically personified it*” (PO 169, emphases added). In other words, however entrenched in their efforts to negotiate a subject position within or without the East–West dichotomy, both scholars have effectively exemplified a “defiant” figuration “whose agency is in opposing its historical fate” – be it by way of the rebellious suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri in Spivak’s text, or Said’s own activism which kept him exiled from Palestine almost all his life (ibid).

However, if the “defiant subject” is to Said and Spivak the manifestation of Frantz Fanon’s “revolutionary theorization of violence” against the colonial state apparatus, it is for Dabashi the cosmopolitan disposition of Persian *Adab* in general and Iranian cinema in particular that best constitutes the alternative. In fact, despite being on the same boat with Said and Spivak in endorsing the “defiant subject” as “theoretically feasible only in the course of revolutionary praxis,” Dabashi contends that “the dialectics of that defiance” must only be predicated on “the colonial a knowing subject without being an agent of the colonial extension of an essentializing, totalizing, and sovereign subject” (PO 172). Simply put, set against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, an event that highlights both Dabashi’s as well as my forthcoming case for Mergan, it is

notable that “when the subaltern speaks” through such ideological mediums as militant Islamism, anti-colonial nationalism, and third world socialism, “s/he speaks the language of its oppressors” and, thus, replicates “the colonially fabricated binary between ‘Islam and the West’” (175). Yet when an artist such as the Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf opts to abandon his post as a “militant activist” so as to become a “visionary filmmaker,” the result is, to Dabashi’s mind, the “radical reconsideration” of the postcolonial condition *and* the organic resurrection of a “defiant subject” through artistic expression:

My interest in Makhmalbaf and his cinema commenced from the moment that I learned that when he was seventeen years old [in 1974] he had picked up a knife to attack a police officer to steal his gun to rob a bank to launch a revolution. When I met him for the first time in 1996 during the Locarno International Film Festival he was a world-renowned filmmaker. (PO 172)

The constructive “distance,” as it remains, between Makhmalbaf the young militant Islamist landed in prison and Makhmalbaf the cosmopolitan artist dwelling the world—well portrayed in his film *A Moment of Innocence*—is what Dabashi terms “the creative crafting of a defiant subject” (PO 172). Makhmalbaf’s cinematic encounter with colonial modernity, following his “aesthetic transmutation” from *a* revolutionary to *the* visionary, proves a categorical shift away from the Euro-American “interlocutor” that simply corners the postcolonial subject to its peripheral “East”—as it did during the Islamic Revolution (ibid). Yet “art,” Dabashi points out in *Makhmalbaf at Large* as elsewhere throughout his work, “is the singular site of resisting de-subjection and restoring agency to the colonially compromised subject” (111). As I therefore return to Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, one of the most widely translated contemporary novelists of Iran, I propose that the creative birth of Mergan in Iranian fiction bears an interesting resemblance to the maturation of the “defiant subject” in Makhmalbaf’s artistic persuasion before and after the Revolution in 1979. As Dowlatabadi reveals to his translator Kamran Rastegar, the initial idea behind *Missing Soluch* struck his imagination during his time as a political prisoner in the “winter of 1977.”

Two years later, towards the eve of the Islamic Revolution, concerned whether or not the novel would ever flow out of his pen:

In the end it did, and for seventy nights I wrote *Missing Soluch*, I wrote it all at once over this period. This was during the revolution, when people were marching in the streets, and some nights, as I was writing, the sound of gunfire was echoing around the city. By chance one night my wife was away in Shiraz and she called me, worried. She asked what I was doing, and I said I was writing. She said, well what are those sounds I can hear in the background? I just answered that those sounds were from the marching in the streets outside, and that I was too busy with my own work to pay attention to them. (Rastegar "Interview" 443)

What is revealing here is that the literary production at hand is not a depoliticized ode to a nightingale to be considered a secluded act of indifference on the eve of a cataclysmic revolution. Rather, Dowlatabadi's act of "writing" *Missing Soluch*, thus reported to his wife in Shiraz, appears to be the literary statement of an author's own participation in the "marching" crowd in the streets of Tehran. A retrospective look at a rural catastrophe, set at the dawn of the mass migration of Iranian villagers to urban centres which then gave momentum to the movement that toppled the monarchy in 1979, and finally with a relentless woman at the epicentre of the narrative who simply dwarfs the patriarchal impact of the novel's title-character, *Missing Soluch* has got more to offer to its moment of inception than Dowlatabadi wishes to admit. But that he remembers he has been too preoccupied "to pay attention" to all the commotion outside is indicative of Dowlatabadi's attempt to mark the occasion not so much through the grand narratives of the ensuing Revolution as the aesthetic expression of his discontent *beyond* discourses of Islamism, nationalism, and (his own personal engagements with) socialism. Integral to this attempt, as I shall now demonstrate, is the empowering figure of Mergan as a relentless and resilient representation of rural femininity imagined in the fictional Zaminej during the 1960s, particularly across the expanse of "God's Land."

At first it is crucial to bear in mind that if the revolutionary moment of Dowlatabadi's agenda is noteworthy, it is not to suggest that *Missing Soluch*

and the “defiant subject” dwelling its world should in any way corroborate the binary opposition often associated with the Revolution of 1979—“Islam and the West.” Edward Said has succinctly demonstrated how the “simplification of Islam” in the US culture took a turn for the worse with the onset of the Islamic Revolution, and gave rise to an even more neurotic Islam–West divide during the Hostage Crisis of 1979–81 (CI xviii). Interestingly enough, the embeddedness of this dichotomy in conceptions of World Literature from West Asia on the one hand, and Dowlatabadi’s own establishment as a widely translated author from Iran on the other have resulted in interesting reviews of his work, and hence perceptions of Mergan’s character in Western Europe and North America.

Generally speaking, the consensus on Dowlatabadi—as winner of the Jan Michalski Prize or potential recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature—is that the author’s work provides a unique *window* into his native country of Iran. Best summed up by the UK’s *The Independent*, Dowlatabadi is a must-read for “everyone ever remotely interested in Iran,” an anomaly amongst nation-states that is synonymous with a theocratic *Islamic* Republic that has since the revolution in 1979 preoccupied the Western eyes (Sahley). From this particular standpoint, which I contend viciously solidifies Fredric Jameson’s misinformed category of “*national allegories*” (69), reviewers often approach the revolutionary moment of *Missing Soluch* with great interest and enthusiasm. The first paragraph of Benjamin Lytal’s approving review of the novel dehistoricizes its setting of Zaminej as “the end of the past in this forgotten corner of pre-Revolutionary Iran”—as if Iran, as known to an American audience, is markedly post-Revolutionary and inherently Islamic. This is distinctly the case in Azar Nafisi’s dismissive overview of Mergan in *Missing Soluch* as Dowlatabadi’s unimaginative portrayal of womanhood “published on the eve of the Islamic Revolution,” an act which in her judgment contrasts the complex “lights and shades” of the “Western” novel.

Reacting to such outlooks, it is notable that Dowlatabadi’s social engagement with, and personal attachment to Mergan is an interesting

parallel to Fassih's Preface to *The Story of Javid* as well as the opening line to *Moby-Dick*. If, in fact, Ishmael's story of survival revealed Melville's intentions to foreground an outcast as the empowered hero of an American narrative of expansion, and if a fictional Preface disclosed Fassih's moral imperative to reclaim a marginalized Zoroastrian at the heart of an Iranian tale of patriotism, then Dowlatabadi's social engagements with his portrayal of Mergan, evident in various notes and interviews, shed light on a parallel authorial commitment that could take both protagonists of Melville and Fassih to task. As I recall Fedallah as the silenced victim of the self-aggrandizing "Call me Ishmael," and remember Suraya as the subdued victim of an idealized archetype of Iranian masculinity registered in Javid's character, Mergan emerges from the margins of *Zaminej* to grapple with the textual violence of the former and the masculine dogma of the latter. In other words, Dowlatabadi's protagonist is a comparative challenge to Melville's seaward multiculturalism (which dehumanizes Fedallah) and Fassih's landed parochialism (that subdues Suraya). Within this process of constructive resistance, Dowlatabadi's attachment to Mergan, which I conceive as an urge to "Call her Mergan," is pathbreaking as both author and character—being recast in a dialogue with Melville and Fassih—refuse to accommodate Ishmael's oceanic ambitions on the one hand, and Javid's landed masculinity on the other. Further in his conversation with Rastegar, Dowlatabadi remembers the epiphany of Mergan's birth when he was in prison:

When I was a young child, my mother used to talk about a woman in the village whose husband had disappeared and had left her alone. She was left to raise several children on her own. Since she didn't want the village to pity her, she would take a bit of lambs' fat and melt it and then toss a handful of dry grass or something into the pan and put this in the oven, so that with the smoke that would come out of the oven the neighbours might think that she was cooking a meat stew for her children that night. This woman's name was Mergan. I had always had an image of this woman in my mind, and the image came back to me when I was in prison, now thirty-six years old. (443)

As Dowlatabadi reiterates the autobiographical facets of Mergan's character here as well as in his published diaries *Nun-i Nivishtan* [*The Calling of Writing*] (103), he has elsewhere highlighted the significance of the character as a rural woman to his entire oeuvre (qtd. in Qurbani 149). Along these lines, I have been asserting that the creative process of writing *Missing Soluch*, beginning in prison in 1977 and culminating on the eve of the Revolution two years later is, perforce, "the creative crafting of a defiant subject" in Persian *Adab* (Dabashi *PO* 172). An aesthetic alternative to the grand narratives of the Revolution for which Dowlatabadi has chosen the pen over the sword, as well as a productive departure from the East-West dichotomy at the heart of polarized readings of the novel as World Literature, Mergan is a "defiant subject" who transcends two symbolic camps representing the gendered nationalism of Fasih's readers and the Eurocentric worldliness of Melville's critics.

To return to the general consensus amongst the ranks of some world literary referees, Dowlatabadi's assertion of his art on the world stage differs in that *Missing Soluch* does not reduce Mergan to the rock and hard place of "subalternity" between the "East" of Lytal's curious audience and the "West" of Nafisi's apathetic response to Iranian fiction. "Out of this cul-de-sac," as I have proposed through Dabashi's reconfiguration of the postcolonial condition, "one possibility has always remained open: a creative re/constitution of cultural character and historical agency from a range of poetic and aesthetic possibilities," which is, Iranian cinema to Dabashi's focus on Makhmalbaf and contemporary Iranian fiction to mine (*PO* 175). If, then, Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* does on one layer of signification reflect its moment of creation on the eve of the Revolution, it has also framed the broader vision of the author's worldliness—neglected by the likes of Lytal and Nafisi—within the history of social developments in contemporary Iran. Beyond the crippling dead-end of binaries that separate an essentially Islamic or secular "Iran" from an abstraction codenamed "the West," I tend to view *Missing Soluch* as the literary defiance of manifold inequalities affecting "the masses of have-not Iranians" which also remains critical of

“complex ethics of poverty” amongst “similarly dispossessed groups” (Emami “Kelidar” 87, Rastegar “Interview” 441). Integral to the dismantling of such violent world is Mergan, a representation of rural femininity, whose struggle to break free of intertwined local, national, and global forces in the microcosmic community of Zaminej not only informs a pro-feminist response to the text, but also constitutes the most explosive manifestation of Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative” in my journey from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*.

The following reading consists of two sections, and with an initial focus on three female characters, foregrounds Mergan as the most articulate voice in the narrative. In “A Tale of Three Women” I will demonstrate that the critical attitude in *Missing Soluch* towards regional and gender identities, namely femininities in a rural context, has resulted in the focalization of two minor characters Raghiyeh and Hajer as well as the protagonist Mergan. Accordingly, the trials and tribulations that the trio must go through, followed by their efforts to survive, are manifest in a number of graphically disturbing but politically candid expositions of misogyny that unsettle any reader from any cultural or historical background. Of the three women, of course, it is Mergan who stands out as the one to redeem Dowlatabadi’s literary universe from its veneer of naturalism. Thus turning to “God’s Land: Mergan’s Poetics of Defiance,” I will further argue that the course of the character’s development includes a number of watersheds that reach a climax with her expression of passive resistance within the public space of “God’s Land.” As the masculinist elite of Zaminej denies Mergan the right to claim and cultivate her land in the aftermath of the land reform program, they find it increasingly difficult to silence her protestations. Yet however interrupted by the locally and globally inflicted forms of economic inequality, gender and class chauvinism, Mergan will radicalize her romantic attachments to “God’s Land” by way of occupying it as a means to recast her-defiant-self. Eventually, delimited neither by her landed struggles nor by the narrator’s ever-tightening grip over her voice, Mergan ventures to



embark on a journey—following and transcending Soluch's trail—into an open-ended space that extends the interpretive boundaries of the narrative.

### A Tale of Three Women

In Dowlatabadi's 1974 novella *Safar* [Journey], the central character Mukhtar arrives at his hometown after a few years away in Kuwait, having lost his leg in the Persian Gulf, and too humiliated to face his wife Khatun. Apart from a peculiarly suggestive reference to Ahab that will serve my interest in this section, *Safar* is a work that not only predates but also parallels *Missing Soluch* in a number of ways. Sharing several structural and narrative similarities, both works contain absent male characters from differently urban and rural contexts, whose actions inform the semiotics of the novels' titles: *Safar* highlights Mukhtar's "journey" to the south and *Missing Soluch* signifies the "empty place" of the title-character in the world of the narrative. Furthermore, both include female characters, Khatun and Mergan, who are abandoned to face the music in the absence of their presumed breadwinners. Khatun, on the one hand, finds herself seduced and then abandoned by another man while Mergan, on the other, struggles to survive against violent odds.

Unlike *Missing Soluch*, though, *Safar* is an exclusive focus on the male protagonist, a victim of social circumstances that pull families asunder and force men to temporary migration. Briefly put, Mukhtar sets off to Kuwait, Iran's southern neighboring country, to seek work on the Persian Gulf. While working as a fisherman on a dhow, Kuwaiti border patrols mistake Mukhtar's vessel for traffickers, and fire their machine guns until the ship sinks: "Some died instantly after the assault," remembers the traumatized Mukhtar, "twenty men sank, and the rest floated until the guards arrived. It was then that some sharks attacked and dismembered our legs and arms: I was one of the victims, the other was a black man, one from Bahrain, three Arabs from Mecca, a Jew, and two Sikhs" (133). While I cannot but go briefly off on a tangent to point out the similarity of Mukhtar's multi-ethnic

crewmates to the *Pequod's*, and that of his dismembered leg to Ahab, it is notable that the unfortunate fate of Mukhtar overshadows the main course of action and indeed seals the plot's denouement. In short, once he returns home to the humiliating possibility of meeting Khatun, Mukhtar chooses instead to throw himself in front of a passing train and end his life as tragically as Dowlatabadi needs him to.

As opposed to the grimly externalized Mukhtar, whose Ahabesque obsession with shame dooms his fate, Dowlatabadi's later creation Soluch is categorically an empty signifier about whom no concrete evidence is ever disclosed. Appearing only in recollections of his sons, or passing by Mergan's eyes as a mirage at the beginning and before the end of the narrative, he is only an evasive memory that could occupy any form or substance depending on the beholder. Be it the image of a loving father and faithful husband, a decent laborer and working-class hero, or that of an unfaithful and incompetent man who abandons his loved ones in misery, Soluch is constantly open to interpretation by his fellow villagers, the narrator, and of course us readers. But leaving speculations aside, *Zaminej* is also home to three less acknowledged women—Raghiyeh, Hajer, and above all Mergan—whose poignant stories rise above any exposition of Soluch to emerge as new pillars from which to view the narrative in a new light. As I will demonstrate in the following, *Missing Soluch* is not so much about Soluch who is “missing” from cover to cover as about Mergan who is “present” as the very spine of the text, binding the narrative around the *rural* and *feminine* perspective she provides to the reader. An appreciation of these two intertwined features of the text—manifest in Dowlatabadi's engagement with the genre by predicating a so-called regional novel on a dynamic female character—is necessary to understand that *Missing Soluch* is both evidence of the plight of women as well as living proof of their capacity to resist and endure hardships.

The mid-twentieth-century land reform program, according to Hasan Mir-Abidini, led several authors to realize that the capital city of “Tehran

could no longer represent Iran” in its geographic entirety (398). Thus evolving a body of work canonically known as regional literature in Iranian fiction, the likes of Mahmoud Dowlatabadi returned to “uncharted territories of the country in search of other life-styles” (ibid). Regarding the specific case of *Missing Soluch*, which well represents Dowlatabadi at his best during a prolific phase when he was simultaneously writing his five-volume *magnum opus*, *Klidar* (1979–1985), it is remarkable that the novel surpasses the mere preservation of “local color” through the landscape of a fictional village as Zaminej. As opposed to the “traditional perspective” on regional literature which, according to Caren Lambert, focuses rigorously on the status of the region within the imagined nation (668), it is my contention that *Missing Soluch* confirms the more productive view that though “regions may be rooted” in the nation state, “regional cultures and their cultural products are mobile” (ibid).

Focusing on dynamic “cultural flows,” and building on “a conception of plural cultures,” Lambert writes of a further attitude—more befitting of Mergan’s status as a “defiant subject”—that “presents regional identity as something continuously being created rather than naturalizing that identity” (669). Accordingly, because “regions” such as rural Khurasan, under the shadow of a central authority, “emerge from a continuing negotiation between nature and cultures in the minds and actions of their inhabitants,” the ensuing literary product is “syncretic rather than pure, mobile rather than rooted” (ibid). Therefore, Dowlatabadi has not externalized the ordeals of Mergan merely to frame a romanticized picture of a rural space (although a chilling panorama has nevertheless been preserved). Neither has he portrayed Mergan against the socio-historical backdrop of the land reform program to simply naturalize an inherent sense of Iranianness by virtue of her heartrending ordeals (as Fassih has done with Javid, aestheticizing his pain as a masculine emblem of national loss). *Missing Soluch* is neither an exclusive picture of the environment nor a mere account of (geo)political atrocities in twentieth-century Iran. It is, rather, a landscape wherein individual voices—from Raghiyeh to Hajer to Mergan—come together to

articulate their existence in all their poignantly agential and at times counterhegemonic experiences. What matters in *Missing Soluch* is how the protagonist confronts winds of nature and forces of industry; struggles with environmental, national, and international influences; and ultimately reimagines, in her triumphs and defeats, a new picture of Zaminej and of herself.

This should bring forth the second aspect of Mergan's character, her gender identity. Surveying representations of femininities in the history of Persian literature, Farzaneh Milani rightly points out a relative dearth of "pivotal women protagonists" in the literary output produced by men (185). The established stereotype of femininity as "solemn and silent"—that is "self-effacing rather than self-promoting, enclosed rather than exposed, mute rather than vocal"—is normalized in canonical works of contemporary fiction like Sadegh Hedayat's *Bufi-i Kur* [*The Blind Owl*] (49–50). It is not until the emergence and subsequent growth of a body of work by women throughout the twentieth-century, from poetry to fiction to cinema, that major literary voices such as Furuq Farukhzad (quoted in the epigraph to this chapter) proceed to build on the legacy of activists and poets like Tahirah Qurratul Ayn in the nineteenth- and earlier centuries. Of course, what strikes as a breakthrough here, given the patriarchal stature of Mahmoud Dowlatabadi amongst his contemporaries, is that his most prominent achievements contain some of the most compelling male-authored representations of femininities in Persian fiction. Such characters as Raghiyeh, Hajer, and Mergan are oppressed figures that nevertheless express tendencies to be independent, self-reliant, and articulate.

Needless to say, acknowledging that a focus on three marginalized women will transcend the title-character is not to suggest that Soluch and what he signifies will not matter to the hermeneutics of my textual intervention. In their treatment of the text as a site of ethnographic fieldwork, for instance, Saba Vasifi and Hasan Zulfaqari suggest that *Missing Soluch* alone documents some two hundred and sixty five acts of explicit and

implicit violence against women (72). If Soluch as the chief male character is personally absent from the narrative, “masculinity” is such an overbearing presence that accounts for the lion’s share of the violence inflicted on the Zaminej folk. From corporeal to communal levels, that is, from physical manifestations of rural manhood in characters like Ali Genav and Mirza Hassan, to collective notions of patriarchal power apparent in national and neocolonial forces imposed from above, dominant *and* coded-masculine discourses of gender and power exert influence on the shifting landscape of Zaminej, causing the exodus of many from the village, the devastation of those who choose to stay, and the positioning of women at the most terrifying end of the calamities that befall in consequence.

Raghiyeh, to begin with, is the first victim of misogyny in Zaminej. Crippled by her husband Ali Genav, she is a thorn in the eyes of her fellow villagers, and a pang of guilt to the reader’s mind to always beware of gender violence in the narrative. Without the slightest intention of either portraying her as a clichéd hero or else confining her in the attic to conceal her distress like that of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Dowlatabadi has simply represented the woman as she barely exists in all her frailty and dormant strength. On the dark side, Raghiyeh is “a woman transformed into anger and complaints” (MS 275). Confined to a lifetime of pain and distress due to her disability and trauma, Raghiyeh is portrayed in a manner to perpetually weigh on the reader’s conscience. Though she is condemned to view the world “from behind an inner curtain,” she has such inquisitive eyes that always disturb the mind (ibid). So as Raghiyeh’s eyes “keep looking at you and ask you something silently,” observes the narrator intently, “something wordless” and “impossible to express” emanate from “the depths of their sockets” to force an unsettling truth from the onlooker.

Raghiyeh’s story has begun on a snowy night when news spreads across Zaminej that heavy snow has destroyed a hut, and that Ali Genav’s mother is buried alive under the debris. Ali himself, who has instead been shoveling snow off the roof of his workplace, rushes to the scene to find his

mother “battered and crushed, like ground meat” (134). Raghiyeh, who is accompanying Ali, and who has apparently had some difficulties with her mother-in-law, becomes the second victim of the frosty evening. The wretched Ali Genav is so furious, and so poor in judgement, that he grabs his shovel and attacks his wife. Not aware that the emaciated woman, compared to a “bag of skin and bones,” is as fragile as she is innocent, he strikes the woman senseless and lames her for life (135). Noting that the snow surrounding Raghiyeh’s head is now “red with blood,” the narrator captures the moment as if to point out that the white snow covering Zaminej has been falling all along to contrast the woman’s pain against the indifference of those who stand witness to the horror (ibid). From that point, Raghiyeh is secluded, and transformed into an ominous shadow lurking around Zaminej. She is referred to by her misogynistic husband as “*zanakay-i qisir*” [sterile bitch], or labeled by some villagers as “*Ruqayah-i nalan*” [the wailing Raghiyeh] (JS 144, 384).

Yet on the slightly more bright side of the affair, despite being the most subdued voice in the narrative, Raghiyeh is surely not the least articulate. Even though her very first words “I’m a goner too!” following the harrowing incident of her mother-in-law’s demise indicate that her attitude reeks of doom and gloom (MS 186), Raghiyeh keeps on to resiliently survive well into the closing page of the novel (506). She is such a stubborn presence that, however “caught in a wasteland,” is constantly observed “creeping along like a shadow in the dark” (272–73). Crawling her way around, “holding onto the wall with one hand and grasping her walking stick with the other,” she does her best to assert her existence (272). This is increasingly evident with the progression of plot as Raghiyeh gradually regains her health, and begins to empathize with and reach out to other characters. For instance, when Abbas is castigated from the community for having been injured at work, Raghiyeh is the only person who cares to help him. Lending the teenaged boy “her crutch” to walk (431), she spends time with Mergan’s son not minding if passers-by call them “two sterile freaks” (482). Towards the end, Raghiyeh even begins to ponder the possibility of divorcing Ali

Genav, planning to “start a bakery,” or perhaps even opening “an opium café” (484). While her ideas could on one level point to the stagnancy of life in the ruins of Zaminej, Raghiyeh’s stubborn refusal to remain paralyzed indicate the potential power of women despite the state of disrepair permeating the narrative.

Following Raghiyeh, Hajer is portrayed as the second victim of Ali Genav’s degenerate actions. “Her small face,” characterizing Mergan’s twelve-year-old child and only daughter, “continually shifted between doubt and anticipation. Between weakness and irresolution” as any child’s countenance should in fairness (*MS* 71). Yet less than a few days after the horrendous incident of Raghiyeh’s injury, Mergan is forced into marrying her daughter off to Ali Genav. The setting of the stage where Ali first throws the idea to Mergan is so foreshadowing of disaster that one cannot but expect Hajer, who is absent from the scene, to soon join Raghiyeh in misery. In short, Hajer’s marriage is initially arranged inside a “grave” which Mergan and Ali are digging and preparing for his deceased mother. The morbidity of the occasion cannot be more unsettling as the apathetic son is burying his abandoned mother and, having just abused his wife, decides to force another helpless woman to marry her child to him. Telling Mergan of his urge to free himself from the “burden” of the “barren” and now “broken” Raghiyeh, Ali intimidates the woman to “Give” him her daughter: “Let me marry Hajer!” (189–92). As Mergan reluctantly concedes, more out of desperation than complicity, a formal ceremony is held to which Hajer’s only response is to hide in the pantry where, as the narrator finds her, she stuffs “the edge of the drape into her mouth” to silence her sobbing self (230). A few days later, on the morning after Hajer is led to her nuptial bed, the dispirited Mergan finds her child abandoned on “the dried blood of the mattress,” having been “tied up, like an animal” all night long (354–55).

But even Hajer, though she has yet to occupy “enough of her own place” (*MS* 71), bears her own “orientating consciousness” (Woloch’s term) to complement that of Raghiyeh and maintain the feminine perspective of

the narrative. If we assume that the sole reason why Mergan is financially capable of finally leaving Zaminej to constitute her most momentous act of emancipation are the “copper pieces” which she hid away from her creditor Salar Abdulla, then Hajer’s solidarity with her mother in helping to protect the family’s meager wealth is vitally significant. Without Hajer’s minor contribution to the flow of action, Mergan would have never been able to face the uncertain future that she later envisions as the final curtain of her resilient struggle. However defined as the most tragic victim of male supremacy, Hajer is the woman who, as Salar barges in, “grabbed the copper pieces and hid them in a chest” (MS 37). Further on, she is Mergan’s one ray of hope as she resists her abusive brother Abbas, choosing not to disclose the whereabouts of the hidden asset (83).

Mergan herself, besides Raghiyeh and Hajer, suffers from her own share of the above. The condescending Karbalai Doshanbe, who cannot wait to hear and bask in the news of Soluch’s possible death, keeps imposing on Mergan like one of Penelope’s intruding suitors (MS 406). And another rival the camel herding Sardar can only pay her debts to Mergan by way of forcing the woman to her knees and sexually abusing her (371). However, if the troubles of Raghiyeh and Hajer present the most depraved forms of male chauvinism, Mergan’s plight, the focus of the later section, is more poignantly embedded in economic and political facets of rural life. Shaped by the broader frame of the White Revolution during the 1960s, such are mostly extrinsic factors that are transforming the fabric of rural life without establishing an alternative to sustain the livelihoods of many proprietors and most laborers. While the implementation of the land reform program, well underway prior to the inception of the plot, has rendered the likes of Soluch unemployed and no longer viable as a workforce, his migration has put Mergan in a peculiar position. Turned overnight into the sole breadwinner of the household, she is caught off guard by a chain of unintended consequences that first cause her many predicaments, and then lead to her head-on collision, across and beyond “God’s Land,” with the patriarchal elite of Zaminej.



The seeds of Mergan's strength were of course sown much earlier in her life, rendering the absence or for that matter presence of a negligible character as Soluch moot to her will to survive. As a woman who has been through many vicissitudes throughout her life as laborer, mother, and woman, "Hers was a stubborn radiance shining from an abyss of despair" (MS 121). Even in her days of youth, as the narrator goes on to reminisce in nostalgia, Mergan was an ambitious, inspired, and life-affirming woman whose capacity to sustain herself preluded the hardships of the present day by decades. To be precise, it is not just her "songs and poetry recitals" or "her dancing and drumming" during the harvest season that are recollected to conjure up the emotionally vibrant and vocally articulate aspects of her personality (122). Moreover, simple forces of nature and inescapable realities of life such as the vitality of "breadmaking" and "being at work," or mere human urge of yearning to "wrap all the men in the world into a single embrace" constitute the youthful Mergan as a socially active and sexually agential woman (*ibid.*).

As for the middle-aged Mergan of the present in her late-thirties, whose resistance and resilience form the sinews of the plot, it is her resourcefulness as a hardworking woman that is noteworthy. Apart from her socio-political attachment to "God's Land" with which I opened the chapter and to which I must return further on, Mergan's eccentric ethics of work as a laborer provide a more personal angle on the constructive impact of her character on the texture of the narrative. First of all, Mergan is widely recognized as a woman who is capable of performing a wide range of tasks from matters of womb to tomb to everything in-between. Whether it is "the ritual of cleansing a corpse" or that of "cut[ting] an umbilical cord," her passion for work "gave her a strength and confidence to take on any kind of task" (MS 198-99). Even regardless of the misogynistic attitude of the likes of Karbalai Doshanbe and Sardar who "view Mergan as an indentured servant," everyone concedes that it is "impossible for someone else to be her master while she worked" (244). Best reflected in Dowlatabadi's Persian, Mergan's pride and joy in her responsibilities was not so much to please the

employer but, rather, "*baray-i bi zanu daravardan-i kar bud*" [it was simply to bring down the task to its knees] (JS 199).

In effect, of all the tasks that Mergan undertakes, the most interesting and by far most symbolic is her yearly duty of "whitewashing houses" towards the end of winter, at a time when villagers ought to cleanse their homes from the darkness of burnt coal. The occasion, which rises with Nowruz or the beginning of Persian New Year in spring, establishes Mergan as an artisan with the emblematic power of redeeming Zaminej and its residents from the hardships of the cold season as well as the malice in their hearts. At her most sparkling mood when at work on a house, Mergan's attitude upon "whitewashing" is described as an expression of "love" for herself, the people around her, and the world itself. "Perhaps love is Mergan herself," says the narrator to further magnify the woman's passionate commitment to at least veneer and at best defy the hardships that the walls she "whitewashes" impose on her livelihood (MS 248). Be it to withstand the "washed-out memory of Soluch," a man who abandoned her without a single word, or the "tribal chauvinism" of Karbalai Doshanbe that keeps poisoning her life (248-49), Mergan's passion at work is the poetic expression of her power to outwit and outlast such manifestations of gender violence. To sum up, much like Raghiyeh's poignant mobility that disturbs the indifferent mind, and just like Hajer's care and thoughtfulness despite the marriage that arrests her development, Mergan's "whitewashing" is also a statement which bears the similar albeit more positive impact of inspiring goodwill and change.

To return to my comparison of *Missing Soluch* to *Safar* made at the outset of this section, the decade-long span separating Dowlatabadi's identical plotlines is a major shift in focus from Mukhtar the male anti-hero to Mergan the female protagonist. The author's development from a limiting account of masculinity in crisis to a much broader vista to issues of femininities indicates how the textual absence of Soluch from the narrative proper in the latter work gives way to the effective focalization of Mergan

against the backdrop of a violently patriarchal context. In addition, in light of Dowlatabadi's agenda involving rural femininities, Mergan's determination to oppose her fate provides the reader with the potential to, firstly, view the narrative beyond a merely mechanical denunciation of rural misogyny through stock characters like Ali Genav and Mirza Hassan. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Mergan's strength helps to buttress a more humanizing picture of women like Raghiyeh and Hajer not just in *Missing Soluch* but also with regard to other representations of male-authored femininities in Iranian fiction.

Finally, readjusting the focal point of analysis from the imbalance of Mukhtar and his abandoned Khatun in *Safar* to Mergan and her missing Soluch grants me with a unique opportunity to approach Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." Conjuring the intertextual parallel between Mukhtar and Ahab, men who both lost a leg at sea and chose self-annihilation over homecoming in humility, Dowlatabadi's vocalization of Mergan beyond the silence of Khatun and across the textual limits of *Soluch* can in comparison challenge Ishmael's treatment of Fedallah within the frame of my analyses. As the most articulate protagonist within the scope of study who defies varied sites of oppression from the local level to the planetary at large, Mergan is capable of mobilizing the scenario first conceived in my reading of *Moby-Dick* and then put to test through *The Story of Javid*. As I earlier illustrated on a literary map (Figure 2), such is the possibility of wedding Mergan to Fedallah by virtue of her acts of defiance on "God's Land," whereby the latter will emerge from the margins of Melville's *seaward* ambition, and the former from the depths of Dowlatabadi's *landed* imagination to aesthetically bridge an alternative space towards comparative studies of American literature and Persian *Adab* in a de-centred multiplicity of literary worlds.

### **God's Land: Mergan's Poetics of Defiance**

Returning to the genesis of *Missing Soluch* at the turbulent moment of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, with the rioting people “marching in the streets” and “the sound of gunfire” rocking Dowlatabadi’s imagination (Rastegar “Interview” 443), it is mind-bending that—of all the people shaping history there and then—a rural woman should emerge as the most resounding of the author’s protagonists. Examining “the mass participation of women” during the 1978–1979 mobilizations throughout Iranian cities, Azar Tabari notes that “the peasant woman,” who also happened to be the most exploited of Iranians at the time, was completely absent from the dominant narratives of the Revolution (21). In the aftermath of the land reform program, Tabari demonstrates, “the need for female and child labour on peasant family plots increased,” and because “the male head of the household” and “older sons” had to migrate to urban centres for employment, it was the rural woman who was the primary victim of increasing “exploitation” back in the village (ibid). Recognizing that women such as Mergan are literary cases that attest to Tabari’s observations on the status of rural women during the 1960s and 70s, it becomes evident that Dowlatabadi’s externalization of such characters is a radical swim against the tide so as to give voice to the silent and the marginalized. What is more subversive, Dowlatabadi has gone a long way to produce a more humanizing alternative to portrayals of rural femininities existing in literary and political discourses of urban middle and upper class feminisms in twentieth-century Iran.

By way of an intervention into the Canon of feminist fiction in Iran, Amy Motlagh has convincingly argued that “female domestic workers” — including “the rural, the tribal, the lower-class, the servile” — are increasingly represented as “the ‘other’ to the imagination of a central, dominant Iranian womanhood” (59–64). Deploying a postcolonial feminist critique to expose “an *internal* process of colonization” in a selection of contemporary Iranian fiction, Motlagh suggests that the modernist state apparatus in mid-twentieth-century Iran encouraged the constitution of a “female subject” in political and literary representations that at least in part functioned as “an agent of the civilizing mission of Pahlavi statist nationalism” (64). Thus

exposing a dichotomy between modern and traditional women in Iran, Motlagh suggests that even towering literary figures like Simin Danishvar and Guli Taraqqi, who were politically at odds with the state apparatus, tended “to represent the status quo” in their portrayals of traditional women as backward and silent (ibid). Motlagh’s critique, of course, can never encompass the entirety of works produced by women since the likes of Shahrnush Parsipur and Muniru Ravanipur, to name but a few, have vividly portrayed the plight of the rural and lower-class women. One must, in addition, be wary of applying a blunt postcolonial critique against any range of Iranian writers who have not normatively laid universal claims by way a Eurocentric will to knowledge. But in so far as the intertwined issues of “gender” and “class” are concerned, Motlagh is perfectly correct to expose sites of inequality registered in fiction. This is where I propose to foreground Dowlatabadi as a novelist whose *Missing Soluch*, bearing a “defiant subject” at the epicentre of the narrative, provides a constructive parallel to works of feminist fiction that remain oblivious to struggles of women *less visible* in urban spaces.

As made clear in the previous section, not only are Dowlatabadi’s representations of femininities a categorical rejection of masculinist renditions of women in often male-authored fiction, they are also liberated from the dichotomy of being either progressively modern in the city or backwardly traditional in the village. Mergan, Hajer, and Raghiyeh are no doubt subdued victims in a ruthlessly patriarchal community. But in portraying their struggles, Dowlatabadi seems fully conscious of the circumstantial realities that shape the characters’ lived experiences. Be it Mergan’s active opposition of the exploitation of “God’s Land” or, else, her complicity with the village patriarchs to marry her helpless daughter off to a misogynist, female characters in *Missing Soluch* emerge in a realistic flow that leads to a dynamic picture of the village in all its strengths and blind spots, aspirations and discontents. And when it finally comes to the sharply critical lens of the narrative on rural gender relations, the captured landscape is too complex to be reduced to the regional periphery of a strictly urban middle-

class feminism ventured by artists and critics that represent the likes of Mergan.

An interesting example, from which I proceed to Mergan's acts of defiance, is the poem "*Kaviri*" [Of the Desert] by the eminent Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu. "*Kaviri*" foregrounds a woman named Zivar, a character borrowed from Dowlatatabadi's *Klidar*. Zivar, a Kurdish woman and the first wife of the protagonist Gul-Muhammad, finds herself exceedingly marginalized in her tribe since her inability to bear a child leads to her husband's second marriage. Yet whereas she cannot eventually assert her autonomy against tribal gender roles, Zivar manages to escape her limited role as she eventually partakes and dies in an armed struggle against the government. In Shamlu's "*Kaviri*," however, the poet's doting words delimit Zivar's narrative role only to her unrequited love for Gul-Muhammad, not to mention her inability to get pregnant. "*Nimi-yash atash-u nimi ashk / mizanad zar zani*":

Half fire and half tear,  
Weeps a woman  
Upon an empty cradle.  
    " Oh my Gul!"  
In a room where  
A man has never eased the yearning of her flesh  
Upon the crusts of an old sapling:  
    " Oh my Gul,  
My Gul!"  
In a fortress of solitude,  
On a desolate road,  
Dancing in the heat of a mirage,  
She is carefree.

Shamlu's attitude, unlike Dowlatatabadi's, is that of an intrusive mind gazing down at Zivar while diminishing her actually perceptive mind and fully riotous body to a mere subject of desire and sterile object of reproduction. Transcending Shamlu's "*Kaviri*," and for that matter Fassih's *The Story of Javid*, where female voices are subdued at the expense of vocal masculinities, I should like to suggest that a focus on Mergan against the backdrop of her social and historical reality will not only do justice to the likes of Zivar and

Suraya in Persian poetry and fiction, but also helps to articulate the untold story of Fedallah in *Moby-Dick*. It has indeed been my contention that Mergan is a “defiant subject”—and a subversive representation of rural femininity in the belly of a metropolitan body of contemporary literature—that is crafted to oppose varied sites of violence and oppression within and beyond her immediate context. Accordingly, Mergan’s quality as a heroic voice of dissent is most articulate knowing that the character was born at a time when rural women were critically absent from social and political uprisings throughout Iran, and vocally silent in literary discourses of urban middle and upper class feminisms. Furthermore, Mergan’s birth in Persian *Adab*, beginning from Dowlatabadi’s first spark of genius in prison to her textual creation during the revolution, has been indicative of Dowlatabadi’s attempt to aestheticize the struggles of a woman who vies to overcome impossible obstacles looming over her fate. By virtue of her battle, which is etymologically inscribed in her name as well, Mergan is capable of resisting patriarchal chiefs, well-connected proprietors, and the implicit shadow of neocolonial maneuvers in mid-twentieth-century Iran.

Mergan is, perforce, a unique character in *Missing Soluch* who provides the most compelling perspective on dissent from dominant masculinities. In a world where Dowlatabadi has conceived men as the very equivalents of the hostile environment of Zaminej, “manhood” is a lost project. Men, and indeed the hegemonic masculinities that so alienate them, are portrayed as violent yet impotent, passive aggressive, resistant to change, and utterly unable to redeem themselves. Perhaps no single pair of characters can better exemplify this state of cul-de-sac than Mergan’s sons, Abbas and Abrau. As two brothers who symbolize male obsession with disrupted modes of living before and after the land reform, one phase dead the other powerless to be born, they are literally exhausted on their paths to adult manhood. When the elder Abbas is employed in the declining profession of camel herding, he is fatally wounded by a feverish camel named Luk (MS 325); and as the more ambitious Abrau seeks to indulge in the nascent mechanization of Zaminej, he gets disillusioned after being

exploited by Mirza Hassan (443). Nevertheless, what the two brothers have in common, and which seems typical of most men in *Missing Soluch*, is their pursuit of what Gregory Peter calls “monologic masculinity.” Given the wide range of male characters including the missing Soluch himself, “monologic” as opposed to “dialogic” manhood entails “a rigid, oppositional, [and] socially controlling masculinity” that is predicated on a set of “strictly negotiated performances” in exclusively homosocial spheres of “work and success” (219–228).

As opposed to such impasse of male insight or lack thereof in *Missing Soluch*, Mergan singlehandedly concludes the plot in more inclusive terms. In transcending “monologic masculinities” through opposing the rabid misogyny of Mirza Hassan and, by extension, the globally enforced economic inequalities that suppress her autonomy, Mergan emerges as a resourceful woman who does not diminish in apathy but dares to imagine beyond her horizons. Turning to her words and deeds in the remainder of this chapter, it becomes evident that the protagonist’s determination to overcome her ordeals is manifest within the dramatic structure of her story. Therefore, that which I term Mergan’s “poetics of defiance”—and which I propose, for the sake of argument, to unfold chronologically—is the threefold trajectory of the character’s development at the core of the narrative. It begins with the exposition of Soluch’s absence at the outset, culminates in Mergan’s confrontation with the colonizers of “God’s Land” during a sit-in protest in the middle, and concludes en route to her own migration to territories uncharted by the rural woman and unimagined by the narrator. During this term, which is symbolically marked on both ends by two apparitions of Soluch, the first receding and the second homecoming, Mergan breaks free of the long shadow of all that the title-character signifies, and enters a state of open-endedness with liberating repercussions for the “mariners” and “castaways” of my thesis—from Nantucket to Tehran and, finally, to Zaminej itself (*MD* 146).



When Mergan awakes to the opening line of the novel, “rais[ing] her head from the pillow” to realize that Soluch is “gone” (MS 7), the flow of imagery passing before her eyes and racing through her mind point to the exposition of a protagonist on the verge of development. Going “straight to the bread oven” to look for Soluch, it becomes abundantly clear that Mergan has been concerned about the loss of the family’s breadwinner for quite some time (ibid). In fact, through the narrator’s free indirect discourse that permeates the first chapter of the novel, we realize that Soluch has been expressing signs of resignation and withdrawal in the past several months. Mergan remembers the emaciated presence of the man next to the oven, his body crumpled into an embryonic pose as “He would fold himself, pull his knees to his belly, and fit his hands between his thighs” (ibid). Speculating as to why Soluch has left—be it to seek better employment or, else, out of ennui and despair—Mergan sets out to listlessly walk around Zaminej to cope with what turns out to be a drastic change in her worldview.

Walking barefoot in a village “hidden beneath a dry layer of ice,” Mergan wanders around in a mood that sheds light on her former state of dependence on the now missing male provider (MS 8). Though she has for long been feeling the absence of her husband on an intimate level, “Soluch’s empty place seemed emptier today than ever before” (10). In a battle with herself, the outcome of which will determine the extent of her strength, Mergan begins to ponder on the ramifications of living with, or more likely without, the title-character. In a period of few hours that have commenced with waking up to the void caused by Soluch’s absence, and which will culminate in a palpable act of coming to terms with her loss, Mergan struggles with the implications of being an independent woman. “Naked, yet without a shadow,” she first feels alienated as if “her *self* had been lost” in a society that is outrightly hostile to single mothers such as herself. While feeling “exposed, bound, shadowless, cold, [and] threatened,” Mergan becomes infatuated, albeit for the time being, with the question “*Who does he think will protect us now?*” (11).

But almost immediately, not a bare second of hesitation after this desperate question, Mergan re-emerges with an expression of strength that defines her personality in the many pages to come. In a train of thought that reaches a symbolic confrontation with the first of the two apparitions of Soluch, Mergan demonstrates that she must overcome the crippling shadow of a breadwinner that is no longer present. Teeming with anger, she visualizes the image of "Soluch's empty spot" as it "sank slowly into the ground, deeper and deeper" until it receded from view (MS 12). So much for the actual Soluch, but as Mergan goes on to wander away from Zaminej—where there is only the ferocious clash of "Wind and wasteland, wasteland and wind"—she is confronted with the illusion a "cloak-wrapped" Soluch walking towards her (27). Reaching her as lethargically as she last remembered the man, the phantasm passes by rather indifferently and crosses a frozen river until "a bed of ice now separated Mergan and Soluch" (28). There, on the Zaminej side of the boundary and adjacent to "God's Land," which will soon turn out to be her ultimate site of defiance, is the moment of closure Mergan has been looking for all along. Having gained the capacity to finally transcend the first sphere of masculine influence, "She turned her back to Soluch and faced Zaminej":

Being and nothingness were upended, turned upside down. Her heart was no longer that small, quiet bird, that tame and obedient sparrow. The wings of the bird had been torn out. Naked and featherless. The hawks, yes, the hawks had set out to flight. And where were the vultures? (30)

To find "the vultures" that are evidently hovering above and preying upon Mergan, waiting for her to give in, we must return to the facts on the ground and stand on the vast image of "land" as the chief source of livelihood in the village. By way of the road to "God's Land," as well as her resolve to cherish it, I must point out that the stretch of barren field on the outskirts of Zaminej is a symbolic site of nonviolent resistance, upon which Mergan proclaims her stance against both external and internal forces that undermine her autonomy (Figure 4). The name of the village itself, to Dowlatabadi's credit,

is comprised of the word *Zamin* [earth, land] and the morpheme *-ej* [ع] that provides the name with the calligraphic effect of “a clasping sensation like a hook” (Muhsini 57). Therefore, the distinctive appellation of a venue (Zaminej) that attracts its boundary (“God’s Land”) to its disconcerting centre (Mergan) proves indicative of a politics of resistance on both textual and geographical levels.

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 4. Southern Khurasan landscape; ISNA (Khamooshi)

Upon the location of Mergan’s civil disobedience, “God’s Land was where the sands gathered together.” Capturing a rather wastelandish scene, the narrator describes “a sloping, sandy piece of earth” across a “fallow, windy place,” which was utterly “Uncared for, [and] abandoned” (MS 218). Furthermore, as an open space left unclaimed by any individual or party, the narrator conjectures why – of all potential names and owners – it was called “God’s Land.” This is interesting in light of Shia and Islamic jurisprudence widespread in Iran, according to which “*anfāl*” [surplus or trophy] properties like “jungles or mines” are not privately owned, but instead belong to the Muslim community at large. Specifically, then, “*mavat*” [lifeless] is referred to “uncultivated, unclaimed,” and mostly “unusable” land that must remain under the purview of religious authority and, potentially, the national government (Mir-Hussayni 109–110, 129).

As opposed to such religious subtext that may have informed the exposition of *Khuda Zamin* [God’s Land], the idea of the protagonist seeking to define her self-image against the exploitation of land by rural patriarchs and urban politicians is staggering enough to make a case for the secularization of her character against local and global inequalities that curtail her prospects. Describing her emotional attachment as well as personal commitment to the land, the narrator remembers a summertime when Mergan and her husband would tirelessly walk “the path between

Zaminej and God's Land," sometimes taking their children with them, to first "sow their seeds," return later to "extricate the plants, leaf by leaf," and eventually come back "to harvest" their watermelons (MS 218-19). Not minding if the land is divinely possessed or mortally dispossessed, the five of them would instead hold the melons in their arms, with "*chishm-i shuwq bi bar-i har butah*" (JS 179), their eyes brimming with pleasure.

Therefore, on the one hand, unlike *The Story of Javid* in which the idea of "land" is illustrative of patriotic pride on a figurative level, it is in *Missing Soluch* a literal manifestation of the laborers' lived and felt experiences in a rural context. Yet on the other, much like Javid's inward-attachment to Iranian land, Mergan's emotional ties to "God's Land" finds a symbolic expression when it comes to her confrontation with the forces external to her immediate environment. Despite the fact that direct references to a centralizing national authority or a scheming neocolonial power are relatively scarce, given for instance that the words "Tehran" and "abroad" are only used four times in the entire narrative (MS 145, 181, 439, 445), both are substantial factors when such issues as Soluch's migration and Mergan's ordeals are at stake. I have previously noted through a literary map (Figure 2) that the "implicit context" of *Missing Soluch* is the Cold War climate that gave birth to the White Revolution in Iran. "By the end of 1950s," almost a decade after Operation AJAX as Ali Ansari notes, the foreign backers of the Pahlavi regime west of the Iron Curtain came to realize that the Shah needed "some political momentum" to both regain popularity and further oppose the threat of communism from Iran's northern neighbor, the Soviet Union (160-61). The idea, thenceforth, was "a bloodless revolution that would at once take the wind out of the sails of the Shah's critics and place the Shah firmly at the centre of the political stage" (160). To this end, the Iranian government proposed a land reform program predicated on the notion that "civic nationalism" would not be fully engendered if the "peasantry" that formed the majority of the country's population at the time "did not at once have a stake in the land they tilled and a more egalitarian relationship with their peers" (161).

This nugget of historical perspective on Dowlatabadi's Zaminej corresponds to the violence inflicted on Mergan since the redistribution of land during the 1960s led, firstly, to the eradication of the absolute power of absentee landlords much to the benefit of the government's own centralizing grip on the distant regions of the nation (Hooglund 78). Secondly, the new architecture of rural landscape resulted in an increasing number of petty landowning peasants, such as Mirza Hassan in our case, who were not as resourceful and as efficiently capable of governing their lands as the former landlords used to be (94). Thirdly, and most poignantly, the reforms led to further aggravation in the state of the most downtrodden of the rural population, agricultural laborers like Mergan. Such were the people who, according to Eric Hooglund, "were intentionally excluded from acquiring land during all phases of the redistribution program" in order to "create a class of peasants proprietors and a class of landless workers whose interests have been in mutual opposition" (97). Bearing in mind the literary representations under my scrutiny, the increasing hostility between the two polarized classes of peasants exposes Mirza Hassan's attempts to exploit "God's Land" at the expense of impoverished laborers like Soluch and Mergan. Eventually, as Soluch is forced to abandon his household, Mergan is left to confront a long chain of catastrophic consequences. From the Royal Palace in Tehran and the Oval Office in Washington, to the Ministry of Agriculture in Mashhad and the alliance of village patriarchs in Zaminej, Mergan is left to pick up the pieces as she finds her rights subdued both as a laborer and as a woman.

Plans are underway from as early on in *Missing Soluch* to wrest "God's Land" from the traditional hold of the laborers to implement a new pistachio project. As Mergan's son Abrau puts it, "the ancient silence of Zaminej would be broken" as all will stand in awe of unprecedented transformations across the village (MS 289). The plan, as proposed by Mirza Hassan and suspiciously endorsed by other petty landowners, is to secure a "loan from the Ministry of Agriculture," bring in a "water pump and a tractor," and introduce "pistachio farming" for the first time in Zaminej

(107–10). As for the soil suitable for work, however, the landowners are unsurprisingly reluctant to give away their own “precious land” and risk it on a project that could take as long as seven years to materialize (108). This is why Mirza Hassan hints at the idea of exploiting “God’s Land,” registering it with the government, and using the document as an alibi to secure proper funding. Interestingly enough, when confronted with the objection that “God’s Land is all that the poor people have to work with,” Mirza Hassan’s response is that it is “God” who owns the “Land,” and that the laborers could easily be paid off (112). Articulating the idea, the proprietor’s tone towards the peasants is deeply scornful, imbued with class chauvinism, and dismissive of individuals like Mergan who may not be willing to oblige. Over here,” declares Mirza Hassan to his partners, “we need to deal with a few poor farmers who use God’s Land. We’ll toss a few scraps to them to satisfy them” (112). Using the phrase “*char-ta aftab nishin*” [roughly translated as “a few poor farmers”] Mirza Hassan degrades the multitude of Zaminej laborers with the condescending quantifier “*char-ta*,” and reduces their dignity to that of livestock, wording the potential exchange as “*luqmah-i bi halqa har kudamishan*” [scraps of food down their throats] (JS 92).

When Mergan is initially informed that such are Mirza Hassan’s plans, her rhetorical question “They want to register God’s Land as their own?” is only answered in Ali Genav’s jab “If it were the land of God’s worshippers, it would already be registered with a deed!” (MS 195). But, surely, Mergan cannot come to terms with the issue as simply as others have, because it was Soluch and herself who first came up with the idea of cultivating “forsaken lands” as a means to ward off poverty (196). Days later, as she is running some errands in Mirza Hassan’s estate, Mergan finally voices her concern where she finds a group of laborers gathered round to be paid off by the landowner. An intent bystander, Mergan overhears Mirza Hassan’s populist speech in support of the pistachio project as he propounds that “it’s best we’re all in agreement and at peace” (262). Scanning her fellow villagers and hearing “the quality of each sound,” Mergan perceives the cacophony of reactions to the offer being made: “demanding, unsatisfied,

flattering, browbeaten, noncommittal, or indifferent" (260–61). As for her own reaction, though she personally contends that the land at stake might not be worth the effort, Mergan is obliged to make it clear that every individual is entitled to her choice.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, all hell breaks loose the moment Mergan realizes that her eldest son Abbas has sold his share of the land to Mirza Hassan. As "Soluch's wife," Mirza has been trying to convince Abbas, Mergan "can only have a claim on the house and the household" and thus "can't inherit the land" (MS 276). Undermining her femininity against her will to assert herself, just like the similar cases of Raghiyeh and Hajer, men from all walks of life ranging from the village chief to the village idiot maintain that because Mergan is a woman, and a widow at that, she cannot legally claim "God's Land." Infuriated by Abbas for having succumbed to the local politician, Mergan is not so much upset about the land as perturbed by the ramifications of Abbas's choice: "Now how am I going to hold my own in the face of those thieving, cunning men?" (276). Kamran Rastegar's translation of the text here, I contend, does not do justice to the character as the translated notion of Mergan's "face," apparently blemished by Mirza Hassan's grip on "God's Land," reduces the woman's vexation only to "Reputation," honour, and good name. In fact, in my own translation, Mergan's original words "*harf-i hisabam*" [verbatim: my valid claim] rather convey her frustrated ambition "to cry out her rights to those thieving cunning men" (JS 225). As Mergan confronts Mirza Hassan on several occasions further on, her reactions towards his patronizing promises of cash in the return for the land – "Despite the fact that you're only Soluch's wife" (MS 365) – always indicate her capacity to speak up against patriarchal tyranny. "She came and went like a lioness in a cage" (ibid), says the narrator to manifest Dowlatabadi's own outburst of adulation for the protagonist: "Mergan's broken heart, an embarrassment for the Lut desert" (JS 294, Figure 5).

Further on, once Mergan turns down Mirza Hassan's pleas to sell off, crying out—with "daggers" for "eyes"—that she would rather keep the land as "my grave!" (MS 364–65), she rushes to "God's Land" intending to divide her one-sixth share of the plot to partition it as a territorial site of protest. Preparing a ditch that will in a few days exhibit the most public spectacle of her defiance in the form of a sit-in protest, Mergan "outline[s] the four corners of her land with piles of dirt and sticks, and set[s] stones onto the piles" (366). The outcome, as we shall see, is the climax of her "poetics of defiance," the course of the character's development from the moment of Soluch's disappearance until the dawn of Mergan's own migration. In addition, the occasion of Mergan's protest on "God's Land" has been significantly preceded by a quarrel with Sardar that has ended with her being raped by the camel herder. Later on, particularly as the narrator comes to her *rescue* to textually heal the sexually abused woman, it becomes evident that Mergan's performance of nonviolent resistance has empowered her in three overlapping ways. Not only will Mergan's protest against unjust rules publicly take the colonizers of "God's Land" to task, her cry of dissent echoing through her defiant disposition will also supersede the wound inflicted by Sardar and the void subsequently created by the narrator. As Mergan finally opts to set out towards her own terra incognita, I will note that hers is an open-ended future that remains outside the grasp of the narrator and beyond the imagination of the author—a conclusion I wish to foreshadow in the following caption of southern Khurasan, the decisive moment of Mergan's vision, photographed at the International Space Station (Figure 5).

[image removed for copy right purposes]

Figure 5. Lut desert in Eastern Iran; ISS the International Space Station

On the day of the sit-in, a "group had gathered on God's Land" to stand witness as the Zaminej elite seek to hold Mergan in check. As Mirza Hassan stands as "towering over everyone else," pointing to the fact that he is the



reason behind the unfolding events, “an official from the Land Registry office” as well as a group of “policemen, representing the law” arrive to notarize the pistachio project once Mergan is dealt with (MS 421). Apart from the petty landowners and government agents, that clearly manifest the centralizing influence of national authority, there are also men such as Kadkhoda Nowruz, Salar Abdullah, and Karbalai Doshanbe who all have gathered to see whether Mirza Hassan is finally able to suppress the “foolish woman” who is “making a scene!” in front of the authorities (422). Therefore, as we find Mergan occupying “a freshly dug ditch” at the centre of “God’s Land,” with the entirety of Zaminej gathered round to testify, she emerges—or rather sits-down—to make her voice heard to a people who have been at once victims of national catastrophes beyond their control, and yet complicit in marginalizing a lower class laborer such as herself.

It is of course Mirza Hassan’s destructive choices that continue to call the shots. Reacting to Mergan’s noncompliance enacted in the spirit of civil rights, the proprietor goads Abrau, of all people, to confront his mother. In a gut-wrenching episode that involves mother and son, and which borders on matricide, Abrau drives his roaring tractor towards Mergan in an attempt to threaten the unrelenting woman with the sharp shovel of the machine “rested on the edge of the ditch.” Abrau’s attitude—which astounds the audience since “Steel has no conscience” (MS 425)—best sums up the young man’s dissolution in the unfortunate swagger of “monologic masculinity” (Peter et al.’s term). However, Mergan’s determination to maintain her posture of passive resistance towards her arrogant son is destined to leave a permanent mark on the collective psyche of her fellow villagers. Despite the unfathomable cruelty that turns son against mother in a tragically broken society, just as Mergan’s “face” was chillingly turned into “leather,” she succeeds in exposing “the outcome of the reunification of God’s Land” to the public eye (425–26). The subsequent reaction of a naïve boy named Morad, a first-hand witness to Mergan’s occupation of “God’s Land,” is the perfect example as he sits flabbergasted—“heavy, like a mountain”—wondering “How many years had he aged today?” (427).

It is highly crucial to remember that the climatic “God’s Land” episode has coincided with a chain of events that will collectively result in Mergan’s brief but consequential detachment from the centre stage of the narrative. To be precise, this “forty-day vow of silence,” which is only aggravated by Abrau’s mechanized brutality, has already begun with Mergan’s dispute with Sardar. While arguing with the man over Abbas’s wages, the camel herder simply responds by terrorizing the woman, cornering her like a “little bird,” and “pull[ing] her back to the darkness at the end of the stable” (MS 371). Sexually abused as her “scream was caught like a bullet in her throat,” Mergan recoils in disgust and escapes Sardar’s estate to lose herself amidst “the cries of the jackal” (372). Thus receding from view, and beginning a period of reticence (from which she will return for her final act of emancipation), Mergan turns into a floating signifier much like Soluch himself, whose lack of words and deeds make her increasingly vulnerable to the narrator’s endless pontifications.

For obvious reasons, Mergan is so traumatized following the sexual assault that she isolates herself “as if she didn’t care if the world were washed away in a flood” (MS 378). For several pages, then, Dowlatabadi’s narrator is no longer a mere proxy to reflect Mergan’s thoughts and words but is, rather, the voice to think and speak on her behalf, and heap speculation upon speculation on a now *Missing Mergan*. This is peculiarly the case through the narrator’s shift of address from being a mere third person to a second person voice who directs the protagonist, like a loving surrogate father, to reassure her that “You’ve just endured a deep dishonor” (379). While he reminds Mergan that a “violent pleasure has planted the seed of a wild violence within you,” suggesting why she is being simultaneously “at peace yet tortured, open yet closed,” he also points out that as a woman “you’re supposed to be chaste, [and] pure” (381). Further on, the narrator’s seemingly obliging but deeply problematic remarks take up a new direction as he proceeds to personify the plundered “God’s Land” through Mergan’s own predicament. Addressing her as both “the land and its guardian,” he notes – with absolute certainty – that the silenced woman must now be torn

with shame and disgrace because “What is dearest to you,” meaning her land *or* her chastity, “has been plundered!” (382).

Here the narrator’s attitude towards Mergan is an echo of Fassih’s treatment of Suraya in *The Story of Javid*, a woman whose existence in the context of Qajar Tehran was categorically reduced to the protagonist’s efforts to defend the feminized “geobody” of Iranian land. It is also a reminder of Ishmael’s voice in *Moby-Dick*, whose authority ruled supreme over the course of action in general and over the fortunes of Fedallah in particular. Empathizing with the sexually harassed Mergan in terms of her love of “God’s Land,” and addressing her as “oh dry earth, oh barren land,” the narrator of *Missing Soluch* attempts to save the woman by way of ventriloquizing a compromise, on Mergan’s part, between “the lashes that scourge your spirit” and the land which is “ploughed through and through” (MS 381). However, and here is the rub, the idea of protecting the land at the expense of posing an existential threat to the character is not an end in itself in *Missing Soluch*. In fact, as I will illustrate in conclusion, Mergan proves capable of recovering from the pain inflicted by Sardar on her body *and* the injustice done by Mirza Hassan to “God’s Land.” Therefore, even though Dowlatabadi’s narrator takes advantage of Mergan’s temporary silence in order to pin her down as *the* guardian of “God’s Land,” the woman has already been thinking ahead, making plans for her future away from Zaminej.

An interesting analogy to understand how Mergan evades the narrator’s doting but sexist remarks following her “vow of silence” is to recall a particular profanity that men in Zaminej employ to address her: “*bi sar-u pa*” [headless and footless] (JS 64). Used to refer to an “ignoble,” “unworthy,” and “despicable” person (Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary), the phrase is, on the one hand, condescendingly drawn on to underline Mergan’s humble origins and lower status as a poor laborer. Yet on the other, Mergan has evidently managed to subvert the term to her own advantage since, as the village chief Karbalai Nowruz concurs, “Mergan

exemplified the working woman of Zaminej. She was perhaps the hardest-working woman of the village who "could outshine "the work of two men" as well as "a sharp sword" (MS 80). In a sense, then, just as Mergan recycles a classist slur as "*bi sar-u pa*" to deconstruct the masculinities that debase her, so can she take the narrator's exalting stereotypes of her character to task. As a result, given her defence of "God's Land," Mergan is not simply a custodian to be forever recognized as "the old mother of the earth" (448). Rising above such lionizing designations that only essentialize her femininity, Mergan defies the narrator's linguistic barriers to eventually conclude her "poetics of defiance" by taking a new path, that is, transcending the idea "God's Land" and, hence, leaving Zaminej to seek work elsewhere. To return to the ongoing search for Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," it is my final assertion that much like Fedallah who has surpassed Ishmael's textual violence and outwitted Melville's authorial intent, Mergan's final actions demonstrate her textual agency to eclipse the narrator's encroachment and outrun Dowlatabadi's reach—well into an alternative region of space-time upon which the two characters meet and their worlds converge.

Towards the end, within the closing three chapters of *Missing Soluch*, Mergan breaks the spell of silence to rapidly reclaim her central position in the narrative. By making a series of fateful choices that come to a crescendo with the apparition of homecoming Soluch, she firstly ends her isolation following the catastrophic climax of the affairs of "God's Land," and secondly seizes the opportunity to leave Zaminej and face the possibilities that lie ahead. As events unfold, then, the moment of Mergan's return from reticence can be read as the beginning of an epilogue to the novel. When Abrau, betrayed by Mirza Hassan's false promises, crawls back to reconcile with Mergan, he finds the woman sitting in absolute darkness, visible only through "the trembling shadows" that fire-matches cast on the wall (MS 447). The enveloping darkness has evidently established a psychological indication of Mergan's "vow of silence." But as Abrau provides the incentive, his mother finds it high time to "breathe" life into the "icy

darkness" that permeates the world around her, turning her forty-day "*sukut*" [silence] into a long overdue "*ashub*" [chaos] (JS 361). Dowlatabadi has carefully chosen his words here to better reflect the paradigm shift underpinning the protagonist's recent development. Mergan, who has been poignantly characterized to love and cherish "God's Land" in a village literally named after one, is now about to embark on a journey away from Zaminej. It therefore appears that the "tug-of-war" which has for long been compelling the woman "to just pick up and leave" is finally reaching a resolution (MS 455).

As Mergan roams around the village the following day, "a new strength" and "movement in her veins" drive her as an outbound optimist to bid everyone farewell and prepare for her journey. Having come to realize that a "past" riddled with violence is only "a heavy load" that denies a portentous "future," she wonders whether it can ever be "possible to stay frozen in one place?" (MS 462). There is an "immense world" lying beyond her horizon, thinks Mergan in trepidation, which is pregnant with endless possibilities and infinite potentials (463). Therefore, her last day in Zaminej becomes a further cry for independence despite the ordeals that have so far delimited her ambitions. Furthermore, as she walks the alleyways "to see everyone for one last time," Mergan stumbles upon those who have wronged her. Confronting her predator Sardar, for instance, she first reaches out to help the man with some chores and then warns him to not "dare look at me like that," stressing that "I'll tear your eyes out of their sockets!" (464–467). While the encounter may on the downside sound like a brief and rather cursory treatment of the rape victim confronting her attacker, the last exposition of Mergan's spirit as a self-reliant, expressive, and eventually itinerant woman is powerful enough to set the tone for the theatrical denouement that follows.

Upon leaving Zaminej, an occasion which marks the final and most climatic passage of the novel, Mergan is prepared to face the uncertain future that extends the limits of her strength. About to set out on her own exodus

this time, Mergan's passage differs from Soluch's in that unlike her husband who left in morbid humiliation, hers is a journey that illustrates not her escape but in fact her defiance of the circumstances that have threatened her very existence. Mergan's combative attitude is dramatically evident against the atmosphere of the scene as she is crossing the event horizon that separates Zaminej from the world she is about to explore. To set the tone of the journey, three prominent figures protrude in flashback to signify what it is that Mergan is heroically surpassing through her migration. First is the apocalyptic presence of Mirza Hassan's "tractor" which is "sitting by the graveyard." Compared to a "corpse that had been pushed out of its grave," it poignantly reflects the failure of prematurely imposed mechanizing forces as well as the land reform program which have evidently failed to improve the state of the Zaminej folk (MS 506). Passing by the tractor, Mergan then comes across the river of blood that turns out to have gushed out of the "camel" which had earlier been thrown in the village water canal as an act of sabotage. A symbol of a bygone age, which together with the shrouded tractor has hurled Zaminej into a state of confusion, the slain camel cannot obstruct the course of Mergan's passage either.

Thirdly, and lastly, it is the second apparition of Soluch marking the closing end of the narrative that haunts Mergan's imagination. It is crucial to remember that if Soluch's receding apparition in the opening chapter of the novel signified Mergan's struggle to come to terms with her husband's abrupt departure, the homecoming man of the closing chapter is conclusive evidence that Mergan has liberated her fate from the overbearing shadow of the title-character. In other words, if Mergan's initial question posed in the first chapter was "*Who does he think will protect us now?*" (MS 11), her most pressing issue on her outbound path is to think of her potential destination, ask "What kind of place are the mines," and demand "Is there work for women there as well?" (507). Therefore, as opposed to her general mood at the outset, Mergan's perception of Soluch upon the close is no longer as a mere unfaithful husband. Rather, having overcome a chain of overlapping ordeals, comprising patriarchal, geopolitical, and even neocolonial impacts,

the travelling Mergan treats Soluch more as a point of departure that has increasingly proved redundant to the aesthetics of her migration.

Mergan's fateful resolution to migrate, despite being narratively entitled to occupy the centre stage of "God's Land" is, I dare imagine, an equivalent of Fedallah's commanding articulation of "Take another pledge, old man" to Ahab against the grain of Ishmael's efforts to inscribe a demonic stereotype of his image on the *Pequod's* wreckage (*MD* 555). Much like the Parsee, Mergan's own non-conformity with regard to the authorization of "God's Land" followed by her decision to uproot herself into a more liberating if perilous state of open-endedness is an equally performative act. That being the case, Mergan's heroic struggle to overcome local and global sites of oppression shall continue to contest established perceptions of her image both in the text and within critical circles—including that of my own in this thesis. As such, Mergan is not only a representation of rural femininity to simply reimagine gender relations in Zaminej, but is also a literary icon that refuses to accommodate, and indeed outmaneuvers ideological constructs and literary theories that subdue her vision. Beyond the West and towards the Rest, past "*national allegories*" and away from "world texts" of Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti respectively, there is more to Mergan than a marginalized woman in a peripheral text of an orientalised "East."

### Chapter Summary

"Some prizes are important, and some prizes are just not to be trusted," says Sal Robinson of the esteemed Melville House, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's publisher in the United States, in reference to the author's 2013 Jan Michalski Prize. The editor boasts in good humor that unlike the Nobel Prize in Literature, for which Dowlatabadi has been considered a number of times, Jan Michalski is not the sort of honor for which "you have to go to Stockholm and see a princess." Sharing Robinson's jab at posh literary affairs and exclusive aesthetic standards as common spectacles on both sides

of the Atlantic, I have been equally wary of literary prizes and, more importantly, critical theories that celebrate literatures from outside the purview of Western Europe and North America as masterpieces of World Literature. Whose “world” and what “literatures” might be at stake, I have been pondering throughout this thesis, when we detach a work of art from its cultural and socio-political reality, and begin to view it from the “West” of a Eurocentric global network—termed the “world literary system”?

As Dowlatabadi tells me in an interview, trying to dismiss such Eurocentric celebrations of his cultural character as “the” Leo Tolstoy of Iran: “each human being is a world in and of him/herself. And drawing on such comparisons [between myself and the Russian author],” he further comments, “one cannot reach a relatively accurate understanding of any individual.” In an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of the *worlds* that Dowlatabadi suggests have guided him to seek inspiration in the likes of “Firdawsi” and “Melville,” I have proposed to recast the utopian but problematic notion of World Literature in my thesis. By way of critiquing three literary characters—the Parsee Fedallah, the Zoroastrian Javid, and the rural Mergan—I have imagined a trans-temporal and cross-cultural dialogue between two literary traditions, Persian *Adab* and American literature, to reconstruct a bridge between two cultural spheres that have shared a turbulent history within the past six decades. I have thereby hoped to posit my exegeses of three definitive texts from Iran and the United States—the super-canonical *Moby-Dick*, the nationally revered *The Story of Javid*, and the widely translated *Missing Soluch*—against a radical imaginative geography. That is, a map of the world that extends appreciation of literatures beyond such neo-imperial cartographies which reduce our otherwise multifaceted cultural artifacts only to the core or periphery of a transnational literary system.

Therefore, if my mission in the second chapter was to retrieve Fedallah’s untold story from the punishing depths of Ishmael’s narrative, and to rewrite it as a “proleptic narrative” following C. L. R. James’s



subversion of Melville's canonicity on Ellis Island, in the third chapter I sought to relocate James's vision by way of finding Fedallah's immediate kin in Persian *Adab*. There I argued that Fassih's Javid, a representation of patriotic manhood embedded in pre-Islamic Iran, shakes hands with his fellow Zoroastrian in nineteenth-century America, and potentially corrects Orientalist misconceptions inherent to both Melville and his critics. Still, I concluded that Fassih's masculinist portrayal of an Iranian man fails to fully grasp the resilience of the silenced Fedallah. Thus turning to Mergan in the present chapter, a unique representation of rural femininity in contemporary Iranian fiction, I have maintained that Dowlatabadi's protagonist is able to reflect Fedallah's capacity to withstand domestic and global inequalities, particularly with regard to the Cold War temporality of *Moby-Dick*. With hindsight, and in light of the literary map drawn to foreground an aesthetic space to bridge nineteenth-century Nantucket and twentieth-century Zaminej (Figures 2), I have demonstrated that Mergan's "poetics of defiance" stands in contrast to Fedallah's "aesthetics of silence," and her "actualized narrative" gives substance to his "proleptic narrative."

Building on Hamid Dabashi's critique of the postcolonial condition, I have proposed that Dowlatabadi's construction of Mergan is "the creative crafting of a defiant subject" that prevails over narrative or critical endeavors that delimit the character's boundaries (*PO* 172). Be it for instance the narrator's efforts to essentialize her femininity as a guardian of land, or that of literary critics like Benjamin Lytal and Azar Nafisi who perpetuate her subalternity in a dialogue between "East" and West," Mergan has effectively surpassed sites of epistemic violence both intrinsic and external to *Missing Soluch*. Best captured in her defiance of patriarchal tyranny, national authority, and neocolonial maneuvers in 1960s Iran, Mergan asserts her existence as a hard-working laborer and unrelenting woman, and makes important choices that recast her image well beyond the imagined world of rural Khurasan. On the more domestic front, therefore, Mergan proves capable of firstly providing the narrative with a dynamic perspective on regional literature, which is not exclusively defined in relation to a

naturalizing idea of the imagined-nation (Lambert 668). Secondly, and more importantly, Mergan is the humanizing portrait of a rural woman who speaks up to literary and political discourses of urban middle and upper class feminisms that have often been dismissive of rural femininities (Motlagh 64). As a potential result, not only has Mergan reached out to Fedallah as a theoretical stronghold against readers and critics of Melville in the twentieth-century, she has also provided a voice—and a shoulder to cry on—for the wide array of women portrayals in Persian fiction and poetry discussed throughout my thesis, from Suraya in Fassih's *The Story of Javid* to Zivar in Shamlu's "*Kaviri*."

Eventually, the idea of retrieving, relocating, and finally binding a "proleptic narrative" from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch* is not confined to the limited number of texts addressed in this and the previous chapters. If, as I have suggested, Fedallah's tall tale is one to cross an often-ignored bridge over colonially fabricated gaps between the global centre and circumference, I am positive a range of aesthetic properties—from literature to cinema—can help to envision a far more constructive and much less curatorial approach to literary traditions around our planet. The particular case of Iranian cinema, to which I briefly turn in conclusion, is interesting as it constitutes a body of work that has maintained an acclaimed global presence in the past few decades. If John Huston's classic *Moby Dick*, screened less than three years after the events of August 1953, completely eradicates Fedallah off the plotline to foreground Gregory Peck's monomania as Ahab (Figure 6), it surely would be fascinating to imagine what haunting prolepses Iranian cinema might have to offer.



Figure 6. Ahab on his boat *without* Fedallah

## Chapter 5

### Amiru's Pledge: A Melvillean Vision from Iran to America

#### On the Waterfront

At the outset of Amir Naderi's *Davandah* [*The Runner*], the camera blinks to the protagonist Amiru (Majid Nirumand) as he stands with disheveled hair staring at a far-off point while deep in thought. The soothing sound of the sea, locating the dark-complexioned boy on the shores of the Persian Gulf, is abruptly interrupted as he begins to scream "Hey!" at the top of his lungs, frantically gesticulating to attract the attention of some faraway object. The ensuing sequence of eerie shots, zooming in on a shore saturated with heat and sunlight, only builds up the suspense as the foamy waves roll over Amiru's fading screams. It is not until Naderi's focus pull that a long shot of the isolated boy against the backdrop of the waterfront brings a colossal oil tanker into view (Figure 1). Amiru is, as Melville's Ishmael would have it, a "water-gazer," a passionate but penniless dreamer who longs to "take to the ship" (MD 25)



Figure 1. Amiru, calling out "Hey!" to an oil tanker

Needless to say, Amiru is characteristically different from Ishmael in that he does not let his melancholy have the better of him; nor does he spend an entire narrative pontificating about the operation of oil tankers and airplanes, his much-desired sperm whales. The solitarily mumbled “How white! How beautiful” suffice to convey his resolve to proactively follow his dream. Amiru also stands out amongst his compatriots Javid and Mergan as there is neither a nuclear family nor a centralized home- or “God’s Land” to contain his unruly mind. In contemporary Iranian fiction it is perhaps Samad Behrangi’s *The Little Black Fish*, a children’s tale-cum-political allegory about a riotous fish who abandons his family in the river to explore the world of the high seas, which resonates Amiru’s restless mind. Yet a more striking parallel that demonstrates the crucial ties of *The Runner* to American literature is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, the free-spirited teenager who rafts along the Mississippi against the conventional currents of family, guardianship, and polite society. Returning to Melville, therefore, I will in this chapter view Amiru as an *adolescent* Fedallah, who has pledged to cross borders and remap the world. Looking back at the journey from the belly of American literature into the heart of Persian *Adab* in my thesis, there is through the self-reflexive lens of Amir Naderi still more traces of Fedallah’s lost travelogue.

Produced by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children & Young Adults in 1984, *The Runner* is widely recognized as the first art-house work of postrevolutionary independent Iranian cinema to have achieved worldwide recognition, winning the Gold Montgolfiere of Three Continents Festival in 1985. Amiru is an orphan who lives alone in the seaport of Abadan in the southern province of Khuzistan. He works a range of hard menial jobs to get by; one day he collects empty bottles off the shore to sell them to a local dealer, and the day after he sells iced water to thirsty pedestrians. A resourceful child, Amiru does not allow a soul to take advantage of his labour; he tracks down a cyclist who does not pay for his water, and comes to grips with a European sailor who accuses him of theft.

Amiru's existence, moreover, is anything but drab and fruitless. At work and at play, he tirelessly runs to assert himself. Fascinated by the fleet of harboring oil tankers, and thrilled by an airplane at the local airport, he runs between the two places hankering to someday travel to a distant place. To feed his imagination, Amiru even lives on board a deserted ship. Having decorated the captain's quarters, he has claimed the vessel to rest and dream in solitude. Leafing through a pile of foreign magazines he cannot read but nevertheless hoards, he looks up images of planes and hangs them by the wall. This ship of the imagination, however, is not meant to remain aground for good because towards the end, Amiru comes to realize that his illiteracy hampers his ambitions. Registering with the local school, he begins to learn the Persian alphabet and takes every opportunity to recite the letters out loud, a practice that deeply informs the narrative closure. Winning a symbolic running race across the flaming oil fields of his hometown, Amiru first shares the prize, a block of ice, with his rivals before guiding us into his incandescent mind: In the closing shot, a Jumbo Jet is taking off a long runway when Amiru jumps into focus, and delivers the Persian alphabet as the plane flies away.

### **A Melvillean Vision**

*The Runner* is, according to Hamid Naficy, a "proto-exilic" film that foreshadows Naderi's emigration to the United States in the early 1990s (Vol. 4 505). An orphan like Amiru, Naderi too grew up in Abadan and toiled under the very heat. Similarly, the experience of living close to a thriving international hub cultivated in the teenaged boy a fascination with frontiers, which he would later break as a filmmaker (ibid). As importantly, the historical context of Naderi's cinema is pregnant with socio-political significance. Hamid Dabashi notes that the colonial history of the oil-rich Khuzistan under the shadow of British and American imperialisms, the Tehran-centrist classism of urban intelligentsia, domestic tyranny before and after the Islamic Revolution, and currently life as a hyphenated filmmaker in

New York City, all constitute Naderi's "political universe," one that is "subsumed in the aesthetics of his formal preoccupation with visual realism" (*Masters & Masterpieces* 225–8).

Above all, what makes the prospective journey of the autobiographical Amiru most appealing to this chapter is Naderi's debt to Herman Melville. As he has confided to Dabashi, Naderi considers *Moby-Dick* "the greatest literary impact on his cinema" (*Masters & Masterpieces* 245). This statement has stimulated much interest as critics discuss its comparative ramifications. Alla Gadassik notes that an Ahabesque form of ambition is what "guides the journeys of Naderi's solitary characters." As if chasing the White Whale, they are either engaged in "productive determination" or entrenched in "self-destructive obsession" (479). Capitalizing on the latter, Naficy approaches the protagonist Gretchen in the finale of Naderi's Manhattan trilogy, *Marathon*. He argues that the woman's obsessive compulsion at—"forcefully, indefatigably, and relentlessly"—solving crossword puzzles in the New York subway resembles Ahab's fixations (Vol. 4 506–7). The inherent perseverance of Naderi's characters notwithstanding, what previous studies seem to disregard is the director's far-reaching divergence from Melville in *The Runner*:

The only different [between us] is that I cannot afford having that kind of destructive pessimism at the end of my stories, the way that at the end of *Moby-Dick*, after all this searching, the entire crew of the *Pequod* is killed, Ahab himself yanked to his death by the very harpoon he had made to kill the whale. That much pessimism I cannot afford. I always like just a smidgen of hope at the end of my films, not too much and sappy, just enough to sustain my hope in humanity. (qtd. in Dabashi *Masters & Masterpieces* 245)

It may be that Naderi, along with a century of *Moby-Dick* readership, is unaware of Melville's own "smidgen of hope" camouflaged in Fedallah's prophecies as he forcefully pleaded with old Ahab to "Take another pledge" and change course (*MD* 555). Nonetheless, given Amiru's remarkable buoyancy, it would be viable to assume that Naderi's commitment to envision a more life-affirming denouement than Melville's is, at least

unconsciously, an articulation of Fedallah's rejected pleas. Just as Fedallah's call to "another pledge" could be the harbinger of Ahab's return to Nantucket, Amiru's characteristic optimism and creativity to dream beyond borders augur how the *Pequod* would have fared had Ahab survived his Pacific crossing.

Throughout this thesis I have called such analogies a mode of "proleptic" reading, a disruptive strategy that exposes sites of violence within such canonical texts as *Moby-Dick*, and foregrounds the muffled significance of subordinate characters like Fedallah. The effort, bound to re-envision our perception of the literary work as a "national" or "world text," renders each literary representation a potential agent of change with a voice to radicalize the space in which the critic thinks, writes, and acts. The idea of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative," as I seek to close through Naderi's Melvillean vision, has had subversive implications for comparative studies of American literature. Not only could the possibility of Ahab's homecoming as a result of his exchange with Fedallah rescue the *Pequod* from its doom, it also leads to a refashioning of Ishmael's self-serving and often unreliable narrative of survival, rendering it more inclusive of outcasts like Queequeg, Pip, and Fedallah. More importantly, the redemptive echoes of Fedallah's voice have de-centralized an American, and by ideological implication Western, master-text that has since the twentieth-century and the Cold War revolved around the liberal values of Ishmael. Thus, my de-familiarizing efforts to align *Moby-Dick* with Fedallah's Persian literary counterparts, a Zoroastrian boy in Esmail Fassih's *The Story of Javid* and a defiant woman in Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch*, supplement perceptions of world literatures towards an egalitarian dialogue between histories and cultures.

The following study of what I call "Amiru's pledge" is yet another act of "proleptic" reading since, along with Fedallah, he partakes in a conversation with *Moby-Dick* by virtue of Naderi's creative conflict with Melville. As such, Amiru points at the silver screen as a visual realm of new possibilities for cross-cultural exchange, and projects an alternative space—



as have Fedallah, Javid, and Mergan before him—beyond the monopoly of a totalizing World Literature and Cinema. As Amiru runs with existential gusto, strives to claim his rights, and dares to imagine new worlds, he reflects a transnational disposition that is inherent to independent Iranian cinema. An interesting example, besides Naderi's own geographic mobility, is the more recent case of Asghar Farhadi who won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for *A Separation* in 2012. He received his Oscar at a time when the Obama administration was taking draconian measures to tighten the grip on the Islamic Republic over its nuclear program, crippling key sectors of Iran's economy (Landler) and collectively punishing an entire nation (Raha Feminist Collective). Addressing the Dolby Theatre, however, Farhadi was glad that whereas "talk of war, intimidation, and aggression" permeates political discourse, "the name of [our] country Iran is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics." Brushing aside Farhadi's nostalgic gendering of his homeland, there lies in his counter-hegemonic presence in Hollywood a turbulent political context from which the filmmaker emerges to celebrate his work at one of the most globally broadcast events of the year. Such is the story of many filmmakers, including that of Amir Naderi, that are rooted in a cosmopolitan tradition of "dissident art-house parallel cinema" in contemporary Iran (Naficy Vol. 1 xxii-xxv).

I have in the preceding chapters de-territorialized *Moby-Dick* following Donald Pease's new historicist intervention into the Canon of American literature, and have de-colonized *The Story of Javid* and *Missing Soluch* following Hamid Dabashi's remapping of the worldliness of Persian *Adab*. Turning now to the global awareness of Iranian cinema in general, and Naderi's anxiety of influence towards Melville in particular, I will conclude with a visual manifestation of Fedallah's "proleptic narrative." Naderi's fascination with *Moby-Dick*, constituting a romantic spirit that flies beyond Melville, reveals the director's transmutation of a set of distinctly American tropes, such as Amiru's outward passion for lonesome self-discovery on the road, into an act of cinematic border-crossing, one that goes a long way to

transcend the Eurocentric confines of a “world republic of letters” and “literary system.”

### **Run, Amiru, Run!**

To return to the opening scene of *The Runner* on the waterfront, Amiru’s most immediate reaction to the imposing oil tanker is to start running along the shore and waving his ragged gunnysack at the harboring vessel. This course of action, informing the laconic title of the film, defines the core of Amiru’s existence. As a teenager, running is what fills him with hope and happiness. The sheer joy of Amiru and his friends gathering along the railroad to chase a passing train is emblematic of their thirst for the unknown. Seizing the day, they often assemble for a running race to grab a cold bottle of soda, or ride their bikes around the city before hitchhiking on a truck and singing their hearts out on the way back. At work, moreover, Amiru outruns those who take advantage of his labour. When a cyclist refuses to pay the one Rial fee of his water, he runs after the man all around the wharf for minutes on end until forcing him to pay his debt. Later on when a British sailor wrongly accuses him of having stolen his lighter, Amiru gets into a brawl with him and runs away unreprimanded. At the end of the day, the thought of *not* running simply terrorizes the boy. When a friend loses his leg to a shark while collecting bottles for sale, Amiru simply quits the job—“because I need my legs.”

Running is to Amiru what sailing is to Fedallah, a *raison d'être* for individual autonomy. Yet this vital urge to outrun obstacles does not drive him as an ideological force of stability. Compared to his contemporaneous film *Chariots of Fire* by Hugh Hudson, for instance, Naderi explores the running sequence as a means to animate his protagonist’s mind before dislocating his imagination, mainly, from the land of Iran. *Chariots of Fire* revolves around a group of athletes in pre-World War II Britain. Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) is a Jewish freshman at Cambridge who has vowed to break all records as a runner, race for Britain in the Olympics, and ultimately

confront European anti-Semitism through sportsmanship. His rival and fellow patriot Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson) is a Scotsman driven by muscular Christianity who feels equally destined to run, and partake in his family's missionary venture to China by virtue of his gold medal. In so far as Abrahams and Liddell's bond of camaraderie is concerned, Amiru may easily join their league and run, as they put it, "with hope in our hearts and wings on our heels." However, when it comes to Abrahams' patriotic will to succeed, represented in his live performance of Arthur Sullivan's "He is an Englishman," Amiru cannot be more different. Whereas both Hudson and Naderi are aesthetically embedded in local geographies of pre-war Cambridgeshire and industrial Khuzistan respectively, Naderi and with him Amiru are thematically detached from any fixed notion of national identity.

The specific tendency in Amiru to defy territorial boundaries and to constantly yearn for uncharted worlds also distinguishes the character from Fassih's Javid and Dowlatabadi's Mergan. Amiru's negotiation of an alternative space between sea and land extends the metaphorical thread in my rethinking of World Literature from Fedallah's *seaward* "proleptic narrative" to Mergan's *landed* "poetics of defiance." Yet by ultimately pronouncing his heterotopian aspirations through the skies, "Amiru's pledge" offers a more inclusive if far less conclusive resolution. In light of Javid's ordeals in Tehran, Amiru is not compelled to retrace his familial roots and does not deem his *vatan* a cause to vouch for his masculinity. If "the warm soil of the plains of Iran" is to Javid the nexus of the universe, it is to Amiru a mere point of departure. Regarding Mergan's sit-in protests on "God's Land," Amiru shares the resilience of the marginalized laborer who asserts her femininity despite local, regional, and global inequalities. But if issues of ethnicity, class, and gender concern Naderi's Amiru, they do not serve any sacred form of domestic security but tend to fly away in a "proleptic" pursuit of global justice.

Amiru projects his *skyward* fantasies on aeroplanes. As the abstracted space that engulfs the whole planet and literally expands to infinity, sky is

the perfect sphere for his wild imagination to roam free. Planes, in addition, are instruments that materialize his fantasies of escape to more feasible proportions. From early on Amiru bears the habit of visiting the local airport to check out the small Cessna that flies to the city everyday. There he stands on the outskirts of the place, where a long chain-link fence separates his eager eyes from his object of desire (Figure 2). Yet even though he cannot board the actual plane, Amiru diverts his enthusiasm to foreign aviation magazines as he piles them up and rummages for posters. At one occasion he takes one to the airport, sits down behind the fence, and tries to compare all the images inside with the grounded plane. When he finally finds the closest match, he smiles and blissfully embraces the page as if owning the simulacrum equals the physical being.



Figure 2. Amiru, frequenting the airport

Chasing real and imaginary planes is also a defense mechanism by which Amiru shields himself from the hostilities on the ground. For instance, the mere act of purchasing magazines from the newsstands of posh neighborhoods is an ordeal in itself. Amiru is not welcome to such districts that are frequented by foreign sailors; and when he does intrude, he must put up with dressed up waiters and condescending shopkeepers: “Don’t touch them, brat. Go away.” These magazines are expensive. Move along, “don’t mess things up.” Thus, whenever Amiru manages to attain his rights at times of hardship and cruelty, say, when he reclaims his stolen chunk of ice from a fellow laborer, he rushes to the airport to flaunt his victory at the

ascending plane. In a similar occasion, after depressingly and fruitlessly yelling out “Take me along” to a receding oil tanker, Amiru climbs up the chain-link fence and trespasses into the airport. He runs towards and prances around the plane, hoping that his festive mood would help to ward off his frustration.

Naficy suggests that whereas Amiru does not cross any geographical borders, “he inhabits a psychic and metaphoric zone where the allure of escape and the pull of the permanent rub against each other” (Vol. 4 505). Nowhere is Amiru’s liminality more evident than on the stranded ship he calls home. Much like Fedallah who is smuggled aboard the *Pequod* for his foreordained journey, and like Huckleberry Finn whose raft is the safe haven for him to rewrite his destiny, Amiru mounts his ship as the site upon which his loosening roots in his homeland, his unfilled desire for immediate departure, and his unbridled enthusiasm for new possibilities converge. Entering the captain’s quarters (Figure 3), Amiru has constructed a practically dysfunctional but poetically dynamic abode, one that illuminates the phantasmagoric course of his many voyages.



Figure 3. Amiru’s solitary quarters

When Amiru climbs aboard his ship after a day of hard labor, he first pulls up the bucket that contains his supper but which also resembles an anchor, suggesting that he is distancing himself from the shore. Inside the cabin, adjacent to the large window separating the interior from the outside are two broken pushcart wheels, hung side by side, that most vividly form the contours of a faux movie projector. While Amiru will further on speak of his passion for cinema in a conversation with his friend Musa, the mock projector also reveals traces of Naderi's autobiographical influence. There is ostensibly more to this space than a mere retreat. Whereas on one side of the room is a piece of broken mirror that only reflects a small fraction of Amiru's self, the shelves on the other are filled with stacks of magazines that he habitually thumbs through while feeding his pet bird, perhaps to complete the image that the mirror cannot reveal. Furthermore, as the narrative unfolds, Amiru keeps adding new ornaments to the room. In a foreshadowing case, he buys a burnt out light bulb from a rag shop and hangs it along with a whole bunch of unusable lamps from the ceiling. On the bright side, they light up the imaginary expeditions that Amiru commands from his cabin. More poignantly, though, they point to the darkness that is his illiteracy, the centerpiece of *The Runner's* final act. Before going to bed, Amiru stands by the forecastle rail, puts his frail and solitary plant beside him, and gazes at the nightfall enveloping the Persian Gulf horizon.

Despite the intricately wrought sequences at the waterfront, the airport, and Amiru's humble abode, thematically bridging his dreams to the outside world, the turning point of the narrative is not a journey on board a ship or plane. Rather, the watershed is the moment he bids farewell to his friend Musa who is off to the sea. Lonely and dejected, Amiru runs the usual route—along the seashore and towards the airport. This time, though, there is much less optimism to the effort. His screams at the harboring fleet are more desperate, and where he sees the ascending plane, he clings to the fence like a claustrophobic prisoner. It is only after he arrives at the newsstand to purchase his usual dose of foreign magazines that Amiru

finally confronts the point-blank reality of his illiteracy, particularly the inability to read the Persian language. Amiru, who has so far been euphorically consumed with unknown lands, comes to realize that the first step in remapping the world is to reconnect with his mother tongue. Unlike Fedallah who fatefully takes to the sea against his better judgment, and as opposed to Huck Finn who consciously avoids formal education to reevaluate his social being on the run, Amiru chooses to stay ashore and learn the Persian alphabet.

Rather than showing Amiru at his common retreat, then, the following scene finds him by the shore as he keeps tearing the magazine he has just bought to pieces while rhythmically mourning, "I must read. I must write. Why can't I?" The influence of this long overdue realization on Amiru's psyche leads Naderi to open the final act with his single use of a non-diegetic score in the entire film so as to accentuate the boy's epiphany. Riding on his bike ahead of the score's heavy beats, Amiru pedals along the runway at the airport, struggling to win an impossible race against the small Cessna. It is only in light of the closing shot of the film twenty minutes later, when he triumphantly recites the Persian alphabet against the backdrop of a raging Jumbo Jet, that Amiru's helpless screams here gain momentum. The following morning, he walks into an elementary school and enrolls for their evening classes. Once Amiru declares to the impressed and supportive principal "I must learn. I have no choice," his invigorating escape from illiteracy predominates the last quarter of the film, and culminates in a pivotal running race as he and his friends compete over a melting block of ice. The interwoven events of attending school followed by the final race finally articulate "Amiru's pledge" as the former marks his material and metaphysical growth towards an ambitious and altruistic triumph at the latter.

Beginning to learn the Persian alphabet, Amiru devises a ritual of his own. Compared to his compliant classmates who docilely behave behind their benches, Amiru stands out as a rebel who prepares his lessons on a

much grander scale. Not only does he bear the habit of walking between the aisles while repeating the teacher's biddings out loud, he also does his homework on the shore where the restless sea can better vocalize his thirst for knowledge. In his reading of the alphabet sequence, Dabashi argues that Amiru's education is "the most glorious lesson in a literacy beyond words." Given that his schoolwork gradually turns musical and dramatically staged, "Amiru, the letters of the alphabet, and his natural environment—water, wind, and rock—all coagulate into one symphonic crescendo" (*Masters & Masterpieces* 242). In a way, then, Amiru's urge to cultivate his senses outside the vicious circle of running from one ship to another plane does not only have didactic but, more importantly, aesthetic implications. The final stage of Amiru's development, embedded in a literary—that is, rhythmically alphabetical—body of knowledge, transforms his rather inert preoccupation with various modes of transport into a constructive engagement with the world at large. Flowing into his strength and stamina for the climatic race across the oil fields of Abadan, Amiru's newly attained agency leads him to an open-handed alliance with his peers on *land*, and an open-ended passage, forthcoming not imaginary, to the high *seas* and above the *skies*.

Reinvigorated after overcoming the problem of his illiteracy, at last, Amiru reunites with his friends following a spell of silence, and tells them he is "ready for any competition." In preparation for the final race, he works out through his recent experiences at school, and draws on the Persian alphabet as his driving force. Warming up by the railroad, for instance, he recites letters of the alphabet as his chronometer—ticking "*shin*, small *sin*, capital *Sin*, small *mim*, capital *Mim*." He proceeds to run along the tracks, inhaling and exhaling the very letters as if they can magically push him towards the train he is tirelessly chasing. Even after reaching and climbing atop the vehicle, he carries on to finish the sequence even more energetically, clinging on to the scorching wagon and crying, "*ayn ghayn, ayn ghayn, fah qaf, fah qaf*" on end.



*The Runner's* grand finale occurs in the place Amiru and his friends call *Atisha* [the fires], the blazing oil fields that mark the geography of Khuzistan province with the pipelines and refineries that support an entire nation. They are also reminders of a colonial past since the 1908 discovery of oil in Iran, which later gave rise to the Anglo-American coup of 1953, the temporal point of departure in my reading of Fedallah as a new epicentre of an old Cold War allegory. Amiru's race across the oil-fields also conjure the Iranian land that bore Javid's enactment of masculinity at its national centre, and inspired Mergan's performance of femininity at its regional circumference. Running alongside the three characters, then, Amiru partakes in a parabolic quest that entwines the past, present, and future of my scholarship towards an enjoyment of world literary treasures beyond national passports and international checkpoints. In fact, Naderi's tactful choice of a block of ice as trophy, which is suggestively placed on an empty oil barrel, attests to the fact that such life-sustaining elements as fire and water transcend the banality of fossilized oil as a national and geopolitical matter curtailing Amiru's destiny.

Like a pistol starting a race, an extreme close-up of stormy tides striking a sheet of flame makes the transition to the field of *Atisha*, revealing the runners in a competition to outpace the evaporation of the ice ahead of them. The affair turns out to be a fierce struggle for existence as the boys try to trip each other up, tug at one another's shirts, overtake their rivals, and win the day. Amiru, above all, is the chief contender and the most vehement one. For a good few minutes from the beginning of the race until he wins, he is the apotheosis of what Gadassik and Naficy view as Naderi's Ahabesque protagonists, determined to seek what they desire with unsurpassed vengeance. Yet by virtue of his spiritual growth throughout the narrative on the waterfront, on the thresholds of the airport, aboard his ship, and finally at school, Amiru is not bound to triumph in monomania. As he reaches the trophy, which is now reduced to a small handful, all his friends are crawling on the ground, gasping in desperation and begging the victor for a piece of the ice. Momentarily heedless of their anguish, just as Ahab was within the

hour of the *Pequod's* destruction, Amiru holds his doubloon and gnaws at it like a thirsty warrior. Yet in a final twist of fate, as if realizing the plight of his fellow human beings in a spirit of commonweal, he extends his hands and offers his friends the life-giving token of ice. Amiru takes “another pledge,” and the crew survives (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Amiru takes “another pledge,” and the crew survives

Amiru’s return to sanity from the island of egomania is the very “smidgen of hope” that Naderi sustains at his denouement, hoping as he noted to avert the fatalism of Ahab’s fixed resolve (qtd. in Dabashi *Masters & Masterpieces* 245). This communal sense of altruism, integral to what I have termed “Amiru’s pledge,” finds an interesting parallel in the *Moby-Dick* chapter “A Squeeze of the Hand.” Describing the process of massaging crystalized spermaceti prior to storage, Ishmael joins his mates around a pool “to squeeze these lumps back into fluid” (*MD* 468). Their collective endeavor, which is submerged in the sensual aroma of spermaceti, drives Ishmael to squeeze his “co-laborers’ hands” in such state of harmony and public generosity that the *Pequod* is fleetingly capable of functioning beyond Ahab’s “horrible oath” (468–9). Closing my thesis, I cannot help but think that one of the “co-laborers” whose hands Ishmael squeezed in humility was perhaps Fedallah, the man whose own story, ironically, is a long and awkward

silence in *Moby-Dick*. Contradicting his inner voice, Ishmael could not “keep squeezing that sperm for ever!” (469). But here comes Amiru, a child of Amir Naderi’s passion for Herman Melville, whose ungrudging pursuit of happiness—from the airport and the schoolyard all the way to his iced trophy—redeems and indeed articulates Fedallah’s “proleptic narrative.”

In the closing shot of *The Runner*, following the victory upon *Atisha*, a gigantic Jumbo Jet is seen taking off a long runway (Figure 5). As it begins its ascent to an unknown destination, Amiru leaps to his feet and, following a rack focus, positions himself at the centre of the universe the plane is about cross. Muffled is the roar of the plane’s engines as Amiru delivers his most articulate recitation of all thirty-two letters of the Persian alphabet in only three breaths. In a new order of world literatures, *Fedallah has passed the harpoon*. Holding it within the silver screen, *Amiru flies away*.



Figure 5. Closing shot of *The Runner*

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